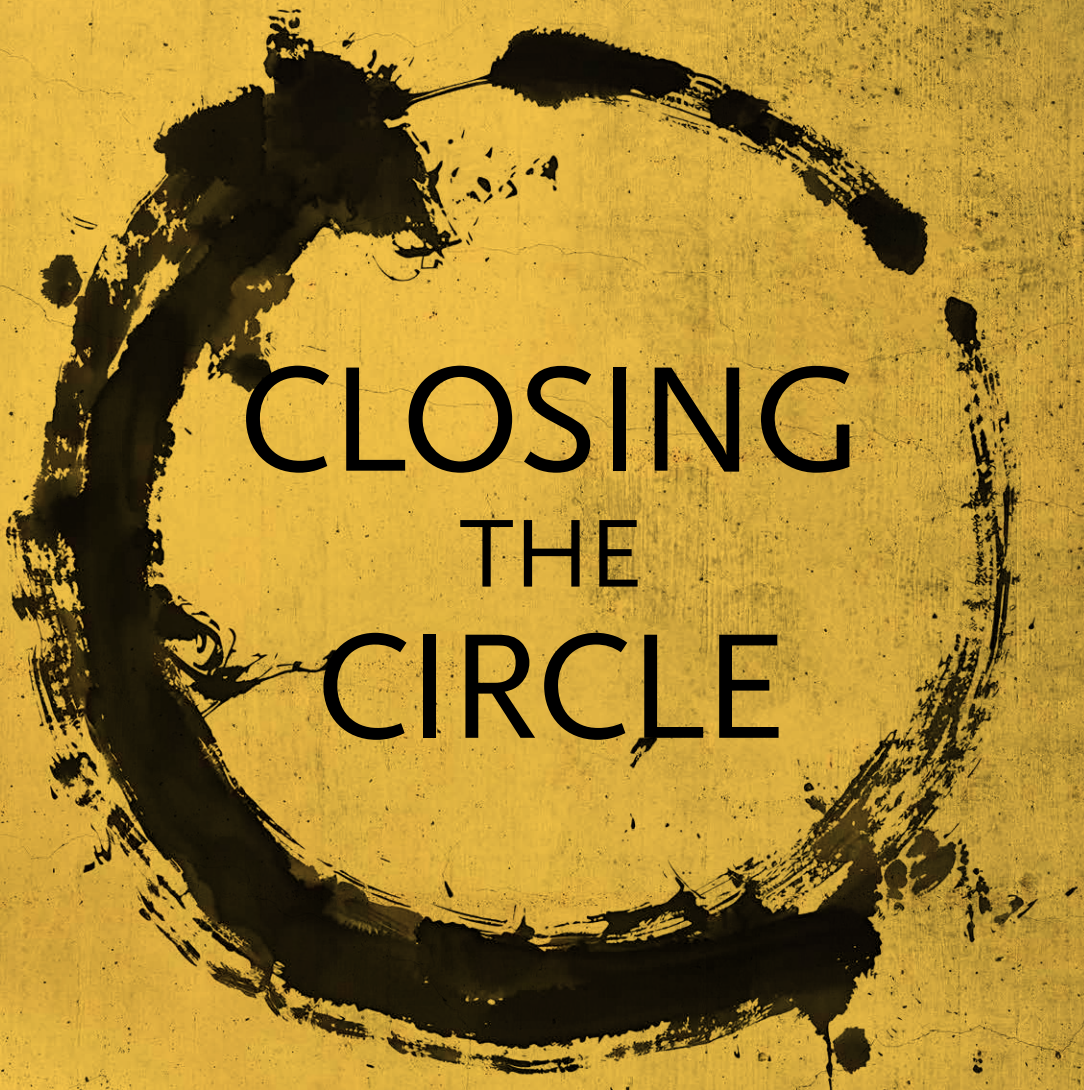
DILIP SIMEON



CLOSING THE CIRCLE

ESSAYS IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORY AND POLITICS

DILIP SIMEON

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FOREWORD BY PREETI MEHRA

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FOREWORD

Going through this eclectic collection of essays, it becomes evident that Dilip Simeon does not write for writing's sake. Unlike many pop columnists who wantonly inhabit the media, he writes because he feels a compulsion to distil his thoughts into words. Indeed, there are observations, nuances, truths, untruths and lessons he has learnt from his studies in history, and the world around him, that seem to have persuaded him to reach out to a wider audience. This urgency to communicate infuses his writing with depth, honesty and sincerity of purpose not often seen in those who write to please editors, push ideologies and to humour those in power.

Ensconced within these pages are not just Simeon's writings from the 1970's to 2024 for newspapers, magazines, journals and blogs. They also capture the essence of a sharp, intuitive mind that was seeing, experiencing, thinking ahead and constantly evolving intellectually and philosophically. That is perhaps the reason why these essays have as much relevance today as they did when penned.

Simeon's writing is symptomatic of the times he lives and lived in. Everything he writes is meshed in an India of turmoil and transition, where the idealism of Independence was giving way to an ugly blend of increasing political violence, communal conflict, the oppression of the marginalised and majoritarian aggression.

Struggling to come to terms with such an India, young Simeon's march

from Delhi University's St Stephen's College to join the Naxalite rebellion in the Seventies along with many other students is not a surprise. Nor is it out of the box that a sensitive, thinking person like him soon got disenchanted with the far Left's commitment to armed struggle and justifications of 'collateral damage'. But what made up his mind ultimately to abandon the movement was the Chinese Communist Party's support of Yahya Khan's brutalities in erstwhile East Pakistan (endorsed obediently by the ultra-left comrades in India) and the plight of Bangladeshi refugees forced to flee their homeland.

So removed from reality and so servile to their Chinese ideological masters were the Maoist underground leaders in India, that Simeon felt they needed to be called out. The result was an anonymous open letter that he wrote in December 1971, which he signed off as "Some Indian Comrades of CPI (ML)." It was in later years that he revealed his identity as the author of the note that raised several eyebrows in the Left in India. This missive, incidentally, is the oldest writing in this collection.

For Simeon, being part of the underground was a learning curve. It did not take long for the young recruit to realise that violence cannot be justified and should not be seen as a pre-requisite for change. After coming overground he completed his MA and joined Ramjas College, Delhi where he taught history from 1974 until he sought premature retirement in 1994. In all his teaching years he held on steadily to his commitment to see a just, equitable and communally harmonious society. He imparted this vision and enthusiasm to scores of students for whom he remains a source of inspiration. His commitment is also reflected in the articles he penned, and the robust reputation he built for himself both as a teacher and an interpreter of history.

During his teaching years, two events left a deep impact on his life and firmed up his belief in the Gandhian doctrine of non-violence. The first was his tryst with violence while protesting for the rights of a college karamchari in 1982. He was brutally attacked by a bunch of motivated hooligans who followed his bike in a car. Simeon was beaten with iron rods leaving him grievously injured and in an unconscious state. It took months of hospitalisation for him to recover.

The second event was the 1984 anti-Sikh carnage that shook Delhi in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. Trying to save people and rehabilitate the victims of such senseless

violence left Simeon deeply disturbed. He along with some others formed the Sampradayikta Virodhi Andolan (Movement Against Communalism) which tried its best to provide much needed relief to the homeless and hapless. The SVA was dissolved in 1993, but its ideals inspired its members to carry on the work of resisting communalism.

Experiencing violence and humiliation up close only reinforced Simeon's faith in non-violence and ahimsa that Gandhi advocated. Several essays in this collection focus on this subject and provide deep insights that only a historian with a world view and a believer in human rights and democracy can elucidate.

The experiences also chiselled the author's intellectual metamorphosis. His commentaries – be it on the Babri Masjid demolition, Gujarat riots, Nandigram or the pernicious rise of communalism – present the possibility of fusing the best of 'Gandhi-ism' in an egalitarian society where all religions and peoples can co-exist in harmony. They also reinforce the idea that any class struggle should be based on truth, non-violence and not on guns and cruelties; that a Gandhian world of inclusiveness and communal harmony is more of an ideal to strive for.

Given his commitment to non-violence, Simeon has always been a strident critic of organisations and political parties that back militant struggles or target one community. The RSS, the Hindutva agenda of the BJP, the activism of the jehadis and acts of vengeance perpetrated by Congress leaders during the 1984 riots, have all come in for sharp criticism. In his essays no one is spared, including the private armies backed by political parties – the Ranvir Sena, VHP, Maoists, Shiv Sena, the CPM's goon squads in West Bengal, not to mention the Salwa Judum, the anti-insurgency militia launched by the Chhattisgarh state. Simeon sums up his rejection of the use of force for achieving political objectives with this succinct thought: "Violence is productive of nothing but more violence. Yet it is celebrated in popular ideologies."

Any introduction to a collection of this kind would be incomplete without a word on the style of writing. One can see an Orwellian touch in Simeon's ability to communicate and break down complex ideas to make them accessible. Though his thoughts and subjects often jump from the past to the present, he injects history seamlessly into them without getting pedantic. And then there are lyrical passages that bring out the lofty yet surreal experience of his challenging trek around Mount Kailash.

For those who have read Simeon in bits and pieces, this compendium brings it all together. Others who have not been exposed to his analysis and insights will find this collection a delightful and purposeful read. It is in many ways a book about transformation. As Simeon puts it: “The transition that I have undergone can better be described as a move from a nihilistic rejection of social reality to a critical dialogue with it; from the politics of violent ‘overthrow’ and ‘seizure of power’, to the politics of non-violent resistance and transformation.”

Preeti Mehra
Independent journalist

INTRODUCTION

This is collection of writings composed and published over nearly half a century. The earliest was written in December 1971, in the midst of the Indo-Pakistan war, a.k.a. the Bangladesh liberation war. At the time I was a cadre of the Indian Maoist (Naxalite) movement, then in its first phase. Let me clarify that there was no formal accredited membership of the CPI (ML) in those days. The fifty-ninth article was written in 2019, a remembrance of a dear friend and comrade, soon after his death. What is common to the first piece and the fifty-ninth one is that they both relate to violent communist revolution – dubbed Left-wing Extremism in bureaucratic jargon. The last two essays were written in 2024. One is a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi; and the other a meditation on the spontaneity of friendship. Its title means May God Protect You. Once upon a time this was a common salutation exchanged between friends who were parting company. It is the sense with which I would wish my readers to close the pages of this book. Khuda Hafiz.

The writings relate to a host of issues – Indian and international – that concerned me, as a teacher of history, a public intellectual and a democratic activist. These issues include above all, communal politics, violent radicalism across the political spectrum, the abiding relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of truth and ahimsa, the problems besetting democracy and justice in India, the decline and fall of the Soviet

experiment in socialism and my experiences as a teacher in the University of Delhi. There is also a concise memoir, composed for a commemoration volume of my alma mater, St. Stephen's College, a summary of my research on the history of the labour movement in Chota Nagpur, and a travelogue of a trek to Kailash-Mansarovar in 2009.

Readers are doubtless aware that this period saw many turbulent events. I do not need to present an outline of my opinions on these matters – that is what this book is meant to do. Two points need to be stated however: first that my understanding of social and political matters changed and developed over the years; and second, that questions concerning truth, justice and violence (and their inter-connection) underpin all these writings.During the mid-1980's and after I wrote several other articles, many of them around the themes covered in this book. However they were academic in nature, and I hope to publish them separately.

My heartfelt thanks are due to Preeti Mehra for her laborious editing work; Sherna Dastur for producing the volume and Amar Kanwar for coordinating the project. For the rest, I owe so much to so many people over these tumultuous decades that it would be futile to try and name them. They include friends, students and comrades, and my dear parents, now deceased. But I have not forgotten them, they are part of me, and I am part of them. Ajay Singh was the latest of my old friends to depart, I wish he had been around to see this book, share memories and for us to laugh together as we did for so many long years.

This book is dedicated to Sitaram Mali, and my students and colleagues of Ramjas College.

Dilip Simeon

1

Letter from 'Anonymous Members' of the CPI (ML)

Protest by a disillusioned Maoist

Author's explanatory note

This is an open letter I wrote in December 1971, as a Naxalite cadre (among many) who experienced the political crisis accompanying the disintegration of Pakistan in 1970-71. It was anonymous, and I was the sole author. So, the phrases '*letter from members*' and '*some comrades*' are incorrect. It was difficult to identify myself at that time.

More than four decades later, there are many things in the letter that I am far removed from. I place it in the public domain because it is part of the micro-history of our shared and fractured past. The letter was appended in a book called *Naxalite politics in India,* by J.C. Johri (1972). One major newspaper reported its contents as an example of dissent among Maoists. It has become especially relevant in the light of the Shaheen Bagh protests of 2019-20.

The letter has glaring mistakes, such as confusing Cripps for Radcliffe (the author of the 1947 partition boundaries). It also speaks of "erasing, through struggle the international boundaries" drawn up in 1947. This will alarm many people but let me make clear that it was written at a time when the boundaries were being re-drawn anyway, in a military conflict. What I was trying to convey was that communists were supposed to be internationalists, and that nationalism based on religion was a dangerous concept, which was coming apart at the time. And I was deeply disturbed

by the Chinese support for the Yahya regime. This extract from an article I wrote in 2010 on insurrectionary politics explains better what was in my mind in 1971:

> "Pakistan's crisis in 1970 could have been the starting point of a popular reassessment of the anti-democratic partition of 1947. The CPI(ML) could have articulated a discourse devoid of the hateful views of communalists. But the leadership was incapable of formulating any viewpoint outside the framework favoured by the Chinese communists, for whom the question of sovereignty seems to have been settled by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648; and what goes on inside a nation state is no one else's business…
>
> Dreamers of a classless society found it too utopian to question the partition of India. Consequently in 1971, Naxalites were the only Indian political current that supported Yahya Khan. They also advised revolutionaries in East Pakistan to defend Pakistan's integrity. This was in line with the Chinese preference for dictators in Sri Lanka, Sudan, Chile and Cambodia. All that counted was anti-Sovietism…"[1]

A fuller context of my Open Letter may be obtained by reading the Chinese government's letter to President Yahya Khan that was published in *Pakistan Times* on April 13, 1971:

Chinese Premier Chou En Lai's letter to President Yahya Khan:

> 'I have read Your Excellency's letter and Ambassador Chang Tung's report on Your Excellency's conversation with him. I am grateful to Your Excellency for your trust in the Chinese government. China and Pakistan are friendly neighbours. The Chinese government and people are following with close concern the development of the present situation in Pakistan.
>
> Your Excellency and leaders of various quarters in Pakistan have done a lot of useful work to uphold the unification of Pakistan and prevent it from moving towards a split. We believe that through the wise consultations and efforts of Your Excellency and leaders of various quarters in Pakistan, the situation in Pakistan will certainly be restored to normal. In our opinion, the unification of Pakistan and the unity of the people of East and West

1 Read more: Permanent Spring

Pakistan are the basic guarantees for Pakistan to attain prosperity and strength. Here it is most important to differentiate the broad masses of people from a handful of persons who want to sabotage the unification of Pakistan. As a genuine friend of Pakistan, we would like to present these views for Your Excellency's reference.

At the same time, we have noted that of late the Indian government has been carrying out gross interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan by exploiting the internal problems of your country. The Soviet Union and the United States are doing the same, one after the other. The Chinese Press is carrying reports to expose such unreasonable interference and has published Your Excellency's letter of reply to Podgorny. (Nikolai Podgorny was then President of the Soviet Union)

The Chinese government holds that what is happening in Pakistan at present is purely an internal affair of Pakistan, which can only be settled by the Pakistan people themselves and which brooks no foreign interference whatsoever. Your Excellency may be rest assured that should the Indian expansionists dare to launch aggression against Pakistan, the Chinese government and people will, as always, firmly support the Pakistan government and people in their just struggle to safeguard state sovereignty and national independence.'

NB

In October 1971, the People's Republic of China was admitted to the United Nations as the legitimate Chinese government, taking the place occupied by the Republic of China, also known as Taiwan. India voted for the resolution. China became a member of the Security Council. Its first use of the veto was to block the entrance of Bangladesh to the United Nations.

Today, when the long-term consequences of communal politics continue to play out in all the successor states of British India, I feel it necessary to remind the younger generation that left politics and values are incompatible with communalism, of any religious hue whatsoever. I salute the people of Bangladesh for their struggle against the murderous politics of razakars and Jamaatis. Indians should support them and do their best to resist communal manifestations in India. The painful and tragic history of fascism in South Asia, India and Europe are revealing. They remind us of the millions killed of all communities in the name of

racist and communal nationalism. Nations must be built on basis of love, non-violence and secular values. If we cannot turn back the clock or erase artificial frontiers, we can transcend them, leave them behind us in a new atmosphere of trans-national solidarity.

The Letter from Members of the CPI (ML)

Dear Comrades and Friends Abroad,

In the light of what has happened in the South Asian region during the past twelve months, we wish to make some statements and ask some questions.

First, it should be made absolutely clear that the revolutionaries of this subcontinent regard it as one country and are resolved to erase, through struggle, the 'international boundaries' drawn up by Messrs. Patel, Nehru, Jinnah and Stafford Cripps.

Second, what took place in East Bengal in the first quarter of 1971 was nothing but the bloody and genocidal suppression of a people's mass and democratic movement by a gang of fascist, obscurantist and utterly foul madmen—and every adjective is carefully chosen.

Third, a certain Foreign Office abroad, the only one from which we expected a principled stand, chose to represent black as white, chose to hide from its people the true nature of its fascist friends, chose to depict a people's desperate struggle against bloody ogres as an 'anti-China war plot', chose to use the terms 'rebel' and 'secessionist' as abuse (!) and chose not to interfere in the 'internal affairs' of inhuman murderers – after having interfered in the 'internal affairs' of Ceylon and Sudan – on behalf of the inhuman murderers, of course.

Fourth, the clever reactionaries in lndia (who never turned a hair while brutally suppressing the revolutionary movement in West Bengal, Andhra and Punjab, and the national struggles of the Naga, Mizo, and Kashmir peoples) and their Soviet well wishers, cashed in on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and immeasurably strengthened their position in the sub-continent – partly, if not wholly due to the marvelous non-interference by the leaders of world revolution and the activities of their good friends, the Maoist mullahs of Islamabad.

The inner crisis of the revolutionary movement in South Asia is the subject matter for a different discussion. But what did the 'revolutionary' leadership of our party (now split in the tradition, no doubt, of 'one divides into two') do with regard to the Indo-Pak crisis? Since their proclaimed first principle is 'loyalty to the CPC' – not loyalty to the masses or to Marxism-Leninism, but to the CPC – they naturally proceeded with the holy task of rationalising the opportunism and chauvinism of the Chinese Foreign Office. A quantitative (or is it qualitative) development of Mao Tsetung Thought was made by a certain leader who proclaimed that Yahya Khan was a 'national bourgeois' (sic!!).

We have been betrayed, comrades and friends, and we know that this is strong language. The 'proletarian headquarters' has indulged in nothing but out and out opportunism and big power chauvinism and we, who were ardent 'Maoists' until recently, say this with the deepest sorrow and dismay. We ask the Maoist missionaries – do you expect us now to quote the Red Book at common people murdered by Chinese bullets? Do you expect us to preach armed struggle to people whose just armed struggle was faced with Chinese tanks? We shall not give up revolution gentlemen, as you have, but we have learned a very bitter and yet very basic lesson – the loyalty of a revolutionary party is to the people, to Marxism, and certainly not to this or that party. And we shall not accept the selling out of proletarian internationalism to the Yahyas, Nimeirys, Nixons and Bandaranaikes of the world. From Stalin onwards, the Soviet leaders have sacrificed world revolution at the altar of their chauvinist foreign policy. We cannot allow this to happen all over again.

Perhaps Allah will tell us why our great helmsman steered our ship on to the rocks and then abandoned us. But as someone said once, great men need no reasons, they leave them to the creative hands of their apologists. 'Sham is sham, and the mask must be stripped off'– It is a damning irony that we have now to strip the mask off the Chinese leadership.

SOME INDIAN COMRADES OF CPI (ML)
Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)

Published anonymously in February 7, 1972 in *Red Mole*, a revolutionary internationalist paper; it was later circulated under my name on my blog on April 9, 2013. See the facsimile of the original here: http://www.sacw.net/article4164.html

2

MARCH 26, 1990, TIMES OF INDIA

Communalism's worst legacy

No political party or formation can claim to be above exploiting religious sentiments in their thirst for power at any price

It is time to clearly articulate the apprehension of a large number of Indian citizens about the political proclivities of the ruling elite. This is especially necessary in the light of the growing tendency of a segment of the elite to engage in the blatant misuse of state machinery for the violent achievement of illegitimate ends, and in the illegal propaganda of communal ideas. Such is the level of the perceived danger that independent-minded citizens have begun of late to resist this degeneration in an organised manner.

The Congress must realize that virulent attacks on the government as the culprit in all current tragedies are based on an unhistorical approach which can find credence only among the most gullible.[1] The violence, *goondaism*, corruption, and total cynicism about power and administration that pervades the polity even today have been engendered under decades of Congress rule, and it cannot evade responsibility for this. This culture, whose chief ingredient is the desire to retain power at all costs – the end justifying the means – and the reduction of politics to mere normless technique, is a culture sedulously cultivated by those who ruled India for 40 long years.

But others too who aspire to, and occasionally obtain power, are just as

1 This article was written in the duration of the Janata Dal government headed by V.P. Singh, which held power from December 1989 to November 1990.

much a part of the problem. The opposition to the Congress by no means distinguished itself by an unqualified attachment to secular, democratic and Gandhian values. The situation now obtaining in the country is, hence, as much a *karmaphal* (the fruits of karma) of the new government and its allies, if one considers them as vectors in a historical process.

Thus, the communal question has been a bleeding cancer for more than half a century, yet no major political tendency has initiated the self-critical heart-searching which characterises Soviet public discourse today. The CPI did at least acknowledge its blunder in lending political support to the two-nation theory through the Adhikari Resolution of 1942. Has the Congress explored and made known its own contribution to the growth of communalism? Do the inheritors of the Hindu Rashtra tradition recall that the concept of Hindu Rashtra and the Aryan theory of race were being propagated decades before the fateful Pakistan Resolution of March 23, 1940? [2] Have prominent leaders of the Muslim communal groups refuted and debunked that false concept? How many Akali leaders are prepared to disown the communal sentences in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution? Such self-criticism is faint, if not inaudible.

But we cannot escape the past, as recent upsurges around the world indicate. "A mistake needs to be corrected", wrote a Soviet reviewer of the famous film, 'Repentance', in 1987; "a crime needs to be punished, a sin needs repentance. The result of an unrepented sin is hypocrisy, diffidence, the absence of a clear moral standard, lack of belief in oneself and the future". The Partition of 1947 and the violence unleashed was a sin whose consequences will continue to torment us all, until we and secular forces in Pakistan repent it through social *prayaschit* (repentance).

Some of the most blatant communal campaigns and instances of violence are known to have had the acquiescence if not the connivance of the Congress in power. Of what use are oaths of loyalty to the Constitution if citizens cannot even take for granted the right to live, and if the police and judiciary are allowed to be affected by communal and class prejudice? But is the current administration really doing its utmost to see that justice is done to the victims of the most recent outrages which took place under the outgoing government? Or is it willing to admit that some of the culprits are influential in the current dispensation?

---

2 The word *Pakistan* was not used in the League's resolution of March 23; this should read 'Lahore Resolution'.

If the BJP can demand punishment for the guilty of 1984, what prevents it from doing the same for Meerut (1987) and Bhagalpur (1989)? Must even the category of innocence be communalised? If curfew violators in Srinagar can be shot, and firing take place in New Delhi's Nizammuddin without warning, will the government have the courage to treat the Green Brigade, the Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal in like manner when they indulge in booth capturing, violent incitement and so on? The shouting of slogans such as "*Mussalman ka do hi sthaan; Pakistan ya kabristan* (Muslims have only two choices, Pakistan or the burial ground)", a hot favourite with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)/Bajrang Dal in recent months, is clearly an offence under Section 153 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The use of communal propaganda in elections is also an offence. Can ministers elected by such offensive means be trusted to apply the relevant laws against their own supporters?

"I don't care how little you give me", said Jinnah to Mountbatten in April 1947 ahead of Partition, "as long as you give it to me completely". It is this aspiration for power at any price which is the worst political legacy of communalism. The integrity of India is not simply a geopolitical, but above all, an emotional matter, as Prime Minister V.P. Singh is fond of saying. All self-styled patriots must ask themselves, honestly, is it conducive for this emotional integrity of India, to shout in the streets that crores of citizens should emigrate or face death? Why should every citizen who is a Muslim share the blame for 1947? Is every Hindu guilty of Godse's crime? Is it right to keep preaching as the VHP/RSS do, that secessionism is purely a product of conversion to Christianity and Islam? Do we remember that the North West Frontier Province (now in Pakistan), a 95 per cent Muslim majority area voted the Congress to power in 1946? Is not such propaganda a living insult to the memories of Badshah Khan, Maulana Azad, and the millions of India Muslims like them, who were never even asked their opinion about Partition in the era of limited property franchise?

It perhaps escapes the notice of the various United Akali Dals that communal politics has reduced Punjab from a province which once extended from Gurgaon to Rawalpindi, into a thrice-divided rump. Perhaps they do remember, and simply do not care.

The Constitution of the Union is both a normative and a technical structure. If it is not implemented faithfully everywhere, criminality, terrorism and secessionism will gain political legitimacy and strength.

Ironically, there is a no better proof of the existence of a secular nationalist constituency in India than the first speech by Jinnah to Pakistan's Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947. His vision of a democratic, secular, future for Pakistan is still an acute source of embarrassment for the ideologues of the "Muslim Nation". After all these years, India still lacks a person with the statesmanlike vision which, for all his faults, Nehru did possess. The Congress as a whole failed to craft the concept and practice of composite Indian nationhood. But Mahatma Gandhi's last struggle and sacrifice was his own, non-violent but fierce emotional rejection of Partition.

Those who speak of the emotional integrity of Indians must reflect on that last sacrifice and attempt to fashion a new concept of patriotism, based on the humane traditions of folk culture and the liberating possibilities of a social-democratic polity. But most of all today it is the common citizens upon whom the burden of the revitalisation of democratic institutions rests. After all, it is they who stand to lose the most if politics be any further left to the mercy of professional politicians.

3

APRIL 11, 1990, TIMES OF INDIA

Combating communalism

Co-authored by Purshottam Agrawal

(Reprinted with the kind permission of my co-author)

A proactive National Integration Council must get the government to act against forces that divide the country and communities

The newly constituted National Integration Council (NIC) is meeting today (April 11, 1990), after a gap of over three years. Much blood has flown in this period, and it is a commentary on existent priorities that no meeting was called during all these months of severe communal flare-ups. This also indicates the 'importance' accorded to the NIC.

The last election in, November 1989, was marked by a paradox. On the one hand, it witnessed an unprecedented manipulation of communal sentiment. On the other, sensible and patriotic citizens put their faith in the personal integrity and the secular credentials of the Janata Dal, its seat adjustment with the BJP notwithstanding. It is quite natural for a minority government such as the present one to revive the NIC, and heartening that it is being consulted on the grave challenges to national integration.

The dilemma of the government that it depends for its survival on the protagonists of Hindu Rashtra, while simultaneously attempting to safeguard the emotional integrity of India, forms the backdrop to the meeting. Will this curtail the effectiveness of the NIC? Will this meeting, too, mouth platitudes, deliver homilies to the citizens and then disperse?

Perhaps the new NIC will perform some useful function, if only by making itself heard. It may recall that the outgoing home minister had presented a national action plan to Parliament in August, 1987, based on the recommendations of the Haksar sub-committee of the Council. This

included curbing the use of religious symbols in elections, banning the use of loudspeakers at places of worship, and the propagation of composite nationalism. The plan was "enthusiastically" received. Three years later, the minister realised that "poor Buta Singh was pitted against Lord Rama". Three years, for the stalwarts of the Congress to bury the NIC with wilful neglect, and to realise the fearful implications of communalism. All would have been well had the Indian voter appreciated Rajiv Gandhi's sudden love for "Ram Rajya", and returned him to power!

Old habits die hard, and our new rulers are only objectively constrained to deal with the monster. Hence, it is necessary for the NIC to bind the government to concrete steps. The current agenda focuses on Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and the Ayodhya dispute. What needs emphasis are the links between them. Tangible solutions will succeed only as part of an overall strategy, of which a people's movement must be the main locus. The NIC must face this question squarely: how can it contribute towards building such a movement?

The real problems, of course, relate to human emotions rather than the barbed wires of geopolitics; in Prime Minister V P Singh's eloquent phrase, we need to bridge the breaches in people's hearts. The agonising question is, how? Can the street propaganda terming Muslims "green serpents" and attaching to them the collective guilt of Partition, build bridges? Rather than throwing open archaeological monuments to curry favour with certain communal Muslim leaders, would it not be better for the government to simply use the law to halt such vicious propaganda? Can Hindus resist succumbing to such ideologies when they are increasingly becoming victims of communally aimed bomb blasts and physical terror?

A vicious circle exists, with the onus always being placed on the "other". Communalism is now feeding on itself, a self-fulfilling prophecy, based on power-lust, bitter memories, and starkly real fears. The NIC must take steps to break this vicious circle; apart from suggesting administrative measures, it can initiate a dialogue with anti-communal groups throughout the country.

The growth of violence has a complex genesis, including the inadequacies of our social-political system, and the frustrations engendered by consumerism, all of which have fostered a profound moral vacuum. Communalism today provides the outlet for some of the most bestial energies unleashed by social disintegration. A society which

requires a permanent enemy will cannibalise itself. Such, after all, was the fate of Pakistan, product of the failure of the Indian nation to compose itself. The mutual animosity of India and Pakistan is but a geopolitical extension of that civil war in which the Indian people have been engulfed since the retreat of imperialism.

The NIC must today decide not only upon a real commitment to the integrity of India, but also whether the national leadership is willing to practise the non-violent and dignified humanism of the long-forgotten Mahatma. Will they remember that the law forbids communal incitement both during and after elections? Will the finance minister, who considers the VHP a charitable organisation, tell us if it is an act of charity to publish the kind of pamphlets that it does? (L K Advani could be requested to provide the Council with a selection).

If the Shiv Sena MLAs in Maharashtra can invoke the names of Bhawani, Shivaji and Bal Thackeray in the course of their oath-taking ceremonies, if the Sena chief can openly call for violence in his election campaign (February 24), should S S Mann be prevented from carrying a sword into Parliament? Can anyone henceforth be prevented from offering *pranams* to gods, goddesses and dons of their choice in statutory bodies?

The NIC must make its stand clear on the Ayodhya dispute, which was manufactured to provide political leverage to one political tendency, and has boosted the morale of various communalists. The so-called Ram Janmabhoomi has no historical, legal or religious basis whatsoever, and to allow the VHP to vandalise the Babri Masjid will be disastrous for national integration. Any machinery set up on this issue should include, in all fairness, not only the self-styled leaders of communities, but also those citizens and groups who oppose communal politics.

The NIC should insist that not merely the administration, but also the political leadership, bear responsibility for communal tension.

Today, attention is focused on Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab. Both provinces have suffered much due to the deliberate confusion of questions of autonomy with communal issues. The pampering of communalists in Punjab by all shades of the political spectrum, the repeated and blatant electoral malpractices in Jammu and Kashmir, the abject failure of the government to punish those guilty of the terrible riots and massacres of the 1980s, and the machinations of the crisis-ridden Pakistani elite, have all affected the climate in these states,

If the NIC can help evolve a national consensus to impartially implement the criminal law, faithfully uphold the secular constitution, and if some leaders can actually stake their lives in non-violent satyagraha for the ventilation of popular grievances, then perhaps there is a glimmer of hope.

But war-mongering has tragic consequences, and sober-minded leaders should try and stop it. After all, India's strongest defence is its constitutional polity, which can be corroded far more surely by the acid of communal animosity, than by the deadliest of foreign adversaries.

4

APRIL 26, 1990, TIMES OF INDIA

Tsars to commissars: The Empire strikes back

The fall of the Soviet Union is the bitter harvest of its authoritarian history

"Alas", said Solzhenitsyn the greatest living Russian exile in his 'Gulag Archipelago', "the rivers of history flow slowly". Even he would be surprised to see the flag of the Tsars unfurled over a demonstration in Moscow by Anarcho-Syndicalists and Greens participating in elections in a multi-party USSR, and Lithuanians reasserting their sovereign nationhood.

The rivers of Mother Russia's great, tragic and dramatic past have indeed arrived at a waterfall, and the USSR is reaping the bitter harvest both of its Tsarist and Leninist-Stalinist history. Rather than see this cataclysm in simplistic terms such as "the collapse of the Russian Empire", or the "victory of capitalism", it would be more fruitful to examine some of its historical complexities.

The Tsarist Empire had humble beginnings. Over centuries it expanded from the small city-state of Muscovy to the largest multinational state in the world, stretching over 11 time zones and including at least 15 major and scores of lesser nationalities. It defended itself in successive periods against invasions by the Mongols, Swedes, Poles, Turks, and French, borrowing its state structure from the Mongols, its armaments technology from Europe, and military organisations from Germany (Prussia).

Alaska was settled in the 1780s, and sold for $7.2 million dollars to the USA in 1867. Vladivostok was annexed from the Chinese in 1861, the Caucasian region and Transcaucasian Central Asia in the last decades

of the 19th century. Finland and Poland were kept subjugated through most of the century. Pan Slavism and Eastern Church orthodoxy were used as ideological weapons in a long drawn out struggle over the declining Ottoman Empire's Balkan and Middle Eastern territories. The expansionism of Russian autocracies was at once defensive and imperialist – its Empire was, however, spread over a contiguous landmass, and never separated from the centre of power by seas and oceans. Not for nothing did the Russian democrats refer to it as the "prison of nations".

The Russian Revolution of 1917, stretching from the overthrow of Tsarism in February till the seizure of power in the name of the Soviets in October, had as profound an influence over the life of the 20th century as did the French Revolution of 1789 over that of the 19th century. But the slogan, "All power to the Soviets" masked deep complexities.

This was not, strictly speaking, one revolution, but three; an anti-capitalist workers' uprising in the cities, a peasant war fuelled by a centuries-old land hunger, as well as an explosion of suppressed national feeling on the entire periphery of the crumbling Empire, from Finland, Poland and the Baltic states to the Ukraine, the Transcaucasian nationalities and Central Asia. It was the Bolshevik revolution which enabled Poland to emerge as a sovereign state for the first time in more than a century and half, as it led to the emergence of independent nations in Finland, and the three Baltic states.

From 1917 till the spring of 1921 the new regime remained embattled, under attack by a 14-nation consortium led by Britain, France, Japan and the USA. Plans were made to divide the territory of the defunct Tsarist Empire among the victorious allies, who openly aided one or other of the 10 different rebel governments which emerged from Mongolia to the Ukraine, and Archangel to the Caucasus. This was the period which saw the birth of the Communist International, committed to leading the world revolution, and which moulded Bolshevik perceptions about the violent hostility of the West.

Their victories were won at the cost of the lives of thousands of the most committed and idealist worker cadres, and were accompanied by severe inner-party conflicts over the questions of political and industrial democracy. The momentous Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 took place amid the uprising by some of their most radical supporters, the sailors of Kronstadt, who demanded "Power to the Soviets and not to the Parties".

This and other plebeian rebellions were put down by the Red Army, but the concessions to the peasants which were announced as the New Economic Party were clubbed together with new rules banning the formation of factions within the party, inaugurating a regime that was to culminate in the Stalinist dictatorship.

It was not merely Tsarist territory that was inherited by the Bolsheviks. A vast bureaucratic machine, "a bourgeois and Tsarist hotch- potch", as Lenin called it, threatened to drown Sovietised workers "like a fly in milk". He was deeply perturbed about the influence of autocratic culture upon the Bolsheviks, and denounced the "stinking bureaucratic … and Soviet bourgeois atmosphere". For their failure to curb "rotten bureaucracy", he said "all of us … should be hung on stinking ropes … and I have not yet lost all hope that one day we shall be hung for this, and deservedly so."

What infuriated him the most was the Party's handling of its Georgian dissidents in late 1922, at the time of the formal proclamation of the USSR. Georgian Bolsheviks who differed with Stalin were manhandled, and their complaints suppressed. Lenin in his last writings condemned the "Great Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and tyrant", apologised to "the workers of Russia for not having intervened energetically enough in the notorious question of autonomisation, which … is officially called the question of the union of Soviet socialist republics", and demanded that the non-Russian minorities be compensated for the humiliations heaped upon them in the past. In his last speech to the Comintern,[1] in November 1922, he criticised its organisational resolutions for being "thoroughly imbued with the Russian spirit", in terms of the method and content of communist activities in other countries. Many of his last utterances were indeed, prophetic.

For most of 1923, Lenin remained incapacitated, dying in January 1924. The year 1923 was the one in which the party also put one of its leaders on trial for treason for the first time. Sultan Galiev's crime was the vigour of his attacks on Great Russian chauvinism, and his advocacy of a federative Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). He based his ideas on the colonial history of Central Asia, its mass rebellion against imperial domination in 1916 (the first tremors of the upheaval of 1917), and

1 *Comintern* – short form of Third (Communist) International, founded in 1919, to promote world revolution

their peoples' perception of Russian settlers as instruments of the Tsars. He stressed the role of colonial peoples in the struggle for socialism, suggested the formation of a colonial International alongside but independent of the Comintern, and called for humane methods of state construction in Central Asia in order to preserve the progressive features of Islam.

He helped organise the Communist Party of Turkestan (CPT) and the Regional Muslim Bureau. In early 1920 the Fifth Congress of the CPT decided to name itself the CP of the Turkic Peoples and resisted the notion of a monolithic party for the entire territories of the former Empire. It is significant that the formation of the Soviet government in Turkistan was undertaken solely by the Russian settlers in the region, who deliberately excluded the local people ("Mussulmans" as they were referred to) on the grounds of their political backwardness. Cultural and racial mistrust plagued communist and Soviet institutions in the region for many years thereafter. As a contemporary historian remarked, "It was not the Bolshevik party which created the Bolshevik power in Turkistan; it was the Bolshevik power which created the Bolshevik party". Galiev's group had even floated the idea of a great Central Asian state, a "Turkic Republic". With six million inhabitants – as a logical consequence of the real dismemberment of the Tsarist empire – in any case, these areas had enjoyed a de facto independence in 1919 and 1920.

It is an interesting conjecture that such an approach might have led to far-reaching changes in the culture of the region and even of Islam, whereas today's rulers are unable to resist the growth of fundamentalism. Those who scoff at this suggestion might care to remember that the Bolsheviks were not averse to "using" religion when they needed to – thus, in the Congress of Peoples of the East, held in Baku in September, 1920, Russian Communist Party (RCP) leaders had invoked the concept of "jehad" in their speeches calling for resistance to imperialism.

The Pan-Islam of those days seemed to resonate with the proletarian internationalism of the Bolsheviks. But Sultan Galiev was expelled, and the USSR constructed as a unitary state in federal garb. At the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923, the Bolshevik Skrypnik remarked sadly that the party was "making a balancing act of the nationalities question … every reference to Great-Power chauvinism must always be compensated by a counter-reference to the chauvinism of stateless people … in point of fact we have waged no struggle against Great-Power chauvinism at all."

The ambiguous nature of the relationship between the Bolsheviks and the ruling culture of the state that they inherited has dogged the USSR through its history. Another phase of defensive expansionism began with the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939, which accepted the notions of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. It is worth remembering that this pact was undertaken after all attempts by
Soviet diplomacy at an explicit understanding with the Western powers had failed, and denunciations of the USSR for this unholy alliance lay ill in the mouths of Western leaders who had only the previous year sought to appease Hitler by agreeing to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia at Munich.

The Red Army's occupation of the Baltic states and its defeat of Finland in 1940 were all aspects of this essential defensive strategy of the USSR, whose rulers could scarcely forget the German occupation of most of Belorussia and the Ukraine in 1918. The progress of the war strengthened feelings of Russian isolation, even as religion and nationalist sentiment were given free rein by Stalin. From 1941 till the Allied landings in France in June 1944, the entire might of the British Empire engaged between five and eight divisions of the German war machine, leaving the Red Army to face and eventually repulse 180 divisions of the Wehrmacht. The USSR lost over 20 million people and suffered enormous material damage. (Indians might be interested in Ribbentrop's offer to Molotov in 1940 of a prospective empire in Persia and British India, in return for a free hand for Hitler in South-Eastern Europe – a "gesture" which was scornfully spurned by the USSR). The emergence of a Soviet sphere in East Europe must be seen in the context of a nation which had suffered unbelievable wounds at the hands of Germany in the short span of 30 years.

In 1955, the Red Army vacated Austria, after an agreement about its neutrality. Soviet diplomacy also indicated then and later, its willingness to accept a unified Germany provided it remained neutral. But between 1956 and 1961 the army of West Germany increased from 1,500 to 350,000, and in 1961, Robert Kennedy even spoke of using the A-bomb to save Berlin. The Cuban missile crisis increased tensions between the USA, determined to uphold the Monroe doctrine and a USSR struggling to attain parity in nuclear preparedness. The 50s had seen an outburst of propaganda, based on notions of "containment" and a fear of communist expansionism which interpreted every anti-colonial revolution as a conspiracy directed by

Moscow. But the history of the Cold War is another story.

The USSR never was a "super power", although the sacrifices of its people during the nightmare years of the 30s and 40s were indeed superhuman. It did achieve a nuclear stand-off with the West during the 1970s, and its military strategy has always been suffused with an age-old paranoia, which has only recently begun to dissipate. Its resolution of the "nationalities questions" has been tinged with Russian chauvinism but the Russian Republic also paid a heavy price for the economic development and the defence of the subject nations of Tsarism as well as the nations of East Europe. Rates of growth of industry, education and medical services have in many cases including Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Tadzhikistan, and Armenia surpassed those of the Russian Republic, which also supplied subsidised energy to its fellow republics.

But it is a sad fact of history that the sins of the fathers are visited upon their children. The Gorbachev leadership, which has unleashed nothing short of civilizational changes in Russian history, is having to pay the price for the bitter legacy of the Russian autocracy, both the Tsarist and Stalinist versions. As E.P. Thompson said at the height of the anti-nuclear mobilisations of the last decade, socialism is but the shape of peace.

Today the USSR is unflinchingly confronting its past, and in so doing, is being forced to discover a new reason for the existence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Russian Revolution was born of a common people longing to end World War I and the events of 1917 did nothing if not pose the questions of the link between democracy, socialism, and the possibility of peace. Why a Union? Even Indians have to think that question afresh. It is perhaps the fate of the Russian people and their co-citizens to pose, once or twice a century, questions that only a unified humanity can answer.

5

OCTOBER 7, 1990, TIMES OF INDIA

The ‘other side’ syndrome

The fall of the Berlin Wall sends confused signals across Europe

It was in the midst of a conversation with Simone Lenz, in charge of the foreign desk of a leading liberal German newspaper, that the immense historical irony of our collective predicament struck me. Were we not all victims of the ‘other side’ syndrome?

The conversation had ranged from the dangers of pan-Islamic fundamentalism to the tendency of certain political currents in India to make Semitic scapegoats of Indian Muslims. Simone asked me why we Indians needed ‘internal emergencies’. The conversation took place in a café a few yards away from the now defunct Checkpoint Charlie, the famous check post in the American sector of Berlin. I responded almost without thinking – surely, she, a German, seated within hailing distance of a border which symbolized the consequences of Nazism and war, could answer that question better than I?

Not surprisingly, the Germans, Palestinians, and the Irish I met, both at a peace conference in Helsinki and in the UK, seemed to feel a spontaneous empathy with the plight of the present-day Asian inheritors of Partition, having undergone a similar experience.

Then, of course, there are the gypsies, those earlier Indian migrants to Europe, loved by some, but hated by many. “Gypsy-Free-Zone,” said the ugly graffiti in beautiful Budapest. An Indian, looking at them, sees himself in their faces, for no matter how fluent they are in the local tongue,

their skin, their music and clothes are from another world.

Wherever one went in Europe, whether it was Britain or Estonia, Germany or Hungary, one could sense the stirrings of a continent confronting and reliving its atavistic passions, simultaneously emboldened and confused by its own upheavals.

Racist sentiment is also on the increase, with Asians, Africans and Turks the targets of hatred and violence, not least in the aftermath of football games.

With the erosion of Soviet domination, and with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's first dubious utterances about the German-Polish border, all of Europe was reminded of the Nazi blitzkrieg. "German-Power-Offensive" said the bold letters on a youngster's T-shirt on the train from Berlin to Budapest. I blinked twice before noticing the small World Cup logo beneath. Quite obviously, football was a mere metaphor for something else.

Indeed, the bogey of the Soviets seems to have lifted forever. I saw teenaged soldiers of the Red Army mingling with the crowds in front of the Brandenburg gate, a few yards away from the impressive memorial to their colleagues who died in World War II. They looked nonchalantly at the scores of pavement stalls run by Lebanese, Turks, and poor Germans selling mementoes of a bygone era, caps and insignia of the communist armed forces, along with GDR currency notes and fragments of the Wall.

Paradoxically, the nightmarish barriers, barbed wires and no-man's land have already become phenomena for nostalgia, as traffic-jams, narcotics, bankruptcies, and mass unemployment underscore a none-too-rosy prospect.

A few have made a killing in cheap real estate, many more face unemployment, and vent their anger on Vietnamese, Turks, Arabs, and Poles. "In united Germany – the shit rises to the surface," says a slogan on a wall in the eastern sector. Is history going to repeat itself? Perhaps not. Scores of buildings, including the famous parliament house, the Reichstag, still bear the pock-marks of the bullets fired in the vicious street fighting 45 years ago. Millions of Germans have expressed themselves against nuclear and chemical weapons. 'Green' consciousness is perhaps the highest in Germany.

The violent nationalist tensions in the USSR have drawn global attention. But the most tragic feature of internal conflict is the growth of anti-Semitism, tragic because of the unbelievable sacrifices (over 20

million died) made by the USSR for defeating Nazism. At the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) conference held in Helsinki and Tallinn (the capital of Estonia, at the time of writing still part of the USSR!), one of the workshops dealt with the Israel-Palestine questions. An elderly Russo-Jewish professor from Moscow University, Yakov Etinger, told us about the climate being stoked up by organisations such as Pamyat (a Russian ultra-nationalist Christian grouping), with sympathisers among the bureaucracy.

But it would be unfair to paint a grim picture. The END conference itself represented much that was optimistic, humane, and rational in today's Europe. One could see a new and vibrant internationalism taking shape, even as the old doctrinaire structures evaporated. In the voyage across the Gulf of Finland, back of Helsinki, an Italian communist, high on Estonian vodka, sang *O solo mio* to a Swedish Buddhist nun in saffron robes, and comrade Moosa Moolla, once the African National Congress (ANC) representative in Delhi, regaled us with lyrics of the Spanish Civil War.

Indians would be interested to know of the immense popularity of Mahatma Gandhi among the ranks of this movement. There were Gandhians from the Basque country, from Slovenia, from Germany, from Lithuania, Sweden, Ireland, and Britain, among others.

Finally, it would not be out of place to mention the problem of identity affecting South Asians abroad. On more than one occasion in Britain, I heard Pakistanis describe themselves as Indian Muslims. In Bradford, the centre of Islamic fundamentalism in the north, one Punjabi argued with a fellow-Pakistani against the notion of a plebiscite in Kashmir, and told us how his aging uncle, a native of Firozepur, wanted to be buried in his *watan* (motherland).

But, unfortunately, the last Indian high commissioner to the UK went so far as to publicly encourage VHP propaganda, an act which has still to be disowned by the Indian state. From a distance, India, with its immense diversity still seems full of potentially great contributions to world culture, when contrasted with a Europe ridden with hitherto destructive nationalisms. Can we redefine our nationalism drawing upon Gandhi, poet Kabir and Guru Nanak, rather than upon communal sentiment and bitterness?

6

NOVEMBER 10, 1990, MAINSTREAM

Whither India?

We are on the verge of a political breakdown. To save the situation the nationalist ideals of socialism, secularism and democracy must be revived.

October 30, 1990 was the nodal point of a well-laid conspiracy to directly challenge the authority of the Union of India, and overthrow its Constitution by the symbolic, violent destruction of the Babri Masjid. This conspiracy is part of a prolonged strategy of the RSS and its front organisation to seize political power through the communal erosion of administrative authority, blatant defiance of electoral norms, deliberate instigation of mass hysteria and bloodshed, and ruthless manipulation of flabby Centrist parties for an accretion advance into state authority.

The campaign is rooted in the yearning among sections of the middle class professional and commercial strata for an authoritarian state, and is accompanied by a strategy of achieving moral hegemony over society. For this purpose, a semeticised caricature of Hinduism utilising monolithic symbols is propagated to build a mass base. It draws sustenance both from the antipathy to the V.P. Singh Government among certain big industrial houses (some scions of the bourgeoisie like V.H. Dalmia and Viren Shah are open leaders of the *Hindu rashtravadis*), and in the increasing desire among a broad section of the public for radical changes in the social system. It is a radical programme, but a radicalism of the extreme Right, offering a totalitarian answer to the current crisis of state legitimacy. If political metaphors have any validity at all, the term "fascist coup d'état" is the most appropriate description of this latest assault on the Indian Union.

In 1948, the Government of India banned the RSS. The order, dated 04/02/1948 declared its determination to "root out the forces of hate and violence that imperil the freedom of the nation and darken her fair name..."; accused the RSS of "acts of violence involving arson, robbery, dacoity and murder", "exhorting people to resort to terrorist methods", and attempting to "suborn the police and military". It also stated that "the cult of violence sponsored and inspired by the activities of the RSS (had) claimed many victims ... the latest and most precious to fall was Gandhiji himself". The press-note of the Government dated 14/11/1948, stated that RSS activists "tend to be anti-national and often subversive and violent, and ... persistent efforts are being made by the RSS to revive an atmosphere in the country which was productive of such disastrous consequences in the past". RSS chief and ideologue Golwalkar's sudden love for secularism was discounted in the note: "These professions of the RSS leader are... quite inconsistent with the practice of his followers..." Gandhiji's Private Secretary, Pyarelal, described the RSS as a "communalist, paramilitary, fascist organisation controlled from Maharashtra". The ban was lifted in July 1949 on condition that it acquire a constitution, abjure violence and secrecy, profess loyalty to the Constitution of India, and confine its activities to the cultural sphere.

In the light of the current events, can it be said that the RSS has altered its character one whit since 1948? Devious methods of political intervention have been perfected. A cult of violence is still preached – its mouthpiece, the *Organiser* of 11/03/1990 tells its readers that "too long a peace leads to selfish materialism and death of social conscience", and denounces "excessive talk of peace and non-violence". Irrational and hateful hysteria against the minorities is whipped up, and open calls for rioting and violence made by its allies like Shiv Sena's Bal Thackeray and Nritya Gopal Das, head of the Ram Janmabhoomi Trust. The loyalty of the police and military is deliberately undermined through suggestive press reports and even exhortations by their leading intellectuals ranging from Arun Shourie to S.C. Dixit, the DIG-turned-saboteur. And all this is apparently for the glory of Ram! BJP leader, L.K. Advani goes so far as to use Gandhiji's last utterance as a moral justification for the political platform of Nathuram Godse. What macabre irony! Is all this not then an attempt to convert India into a saffron version of Pakistan?

Because fascist populism feeds upon traditional conservative

sentiments, and has the direct support of sections of the ruling class, it can make severe ideological inroads into the administration and media. The ex-judges, ex-DIGs and ex-Maharanis running amuck these days are members of the social elite, capable of undermining the entire normative fabric of the constitutional order. Thus, the election campaign of the BJP was (and will be) of the type which led to Shiv Sainik Ramesh Prabhoo's disqualification in the famous Vile Parle election case in Bombay three years ago. That is, their campaign is a shameless violation of the Representation of the People Act, which forbids communal propaganda. But such is the degeneration of the State which they have already achieved, that they can do so without hindrance. Those of us still befooled by their oath to the Constitution would do well to remember that Hitler came to power through the ballot box.

The activities of the RSS are creating, in the same heartland of India, social and political conditions similar to what Hizbul Mujahideen and assorted Khalistani groups have created in Kashmir and Punjab respectively. That is, a breakdown of India's carefully nurtured state institutions, which, for all their weaknesses, have managed to maintain a republican, democratic order. The normative and communal redefinition of citizenship and patriotism, the glorification of criminal violence, the preaching of doctrines of collective guilt and revenge (similar to the Nazis' use of Biblical anti-Semitism to preach hatred against the Jews), their resentment of the virtue of tolerance even whilst asserting that tolerance is a hallmark of Hinduism – all this will lead to political results akin to the cannibalistic politics of Pakistan. Indeed, the entire strategy is for a militarization of civil society which will smash democratic dissent, replace consensus with their favoured style of character assassination and intimidation, and pluralism with monolithic, fragmented democratic institutions re-integrating them in a Nazi-style state, and implement draconian measures against the social-democratic movements of the oppressed.

Moreover, such politics will add fuel to the flames of secessionism, with all the remaining hope of winning back the confidence of populations demoralised by terror being lost. A country is held together by the democratic legitimacy of the system of governance, not simply by hard state power. The political successes of the BJP will lead to a permanent state of civil war in India, with various types of communalism reinforcing

each other. We may recall that the RSS/BJP intervened in the Assam agitation pushing a communal line, and that the net result of that chauvinistic movement is a supine Asom Gana Parishad Government, outflanked by its own godchild, the ULFA, which demands secession from India. (Significantly, the ULFA warned all communalists of dire consequences on October 30.) The possibility of the North-East remaining with India will erode – already the secessionist programme of the NSCN in Nagaland speaks of Protestantism as the "state religion" of an independent Nagaland, and the Government of Arunachal bans the entry of Indian Christian missionaries even for purposes of schooling, with no such rules restricting the entry of the Ramakrishna Mission. If the stalwarts of the BJP want all the North-Eastern Indian citizens to get completely alienated from the Union of India, they should carry through their mosque-destruction strategy.

The entire situation today is the product of a long-drawn out struggle over the very definition of India's nationhood, and sharply conflicting concepts of religiosity. From the earliest days of the national movement, reactionary sections of landlords, commercial and industrial magnates along with the conservative intelligentsia attempted to construct communal movements of all hues – the history of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League testify to the class and political character of communalism. But the Gandhian version of social democracy proved to be the more basic motivation which impelled the Indian people towards independence. Partition was a significant defeat for secular nationalism, however, and this gave the Muslim communal forces a stranglehold over Pakistan, while immensely strengthening the *Hindu Rashtravadis* in India, who have since functioned as fascist parasites within the secular polity, using democracy in order to subvert it.

As the Congress gradually betrayed the popular yearning for social change, and reduced politics to a cynical card-game, and as an economic crisis of immense proportions developed, ultra-Right wing communal ideologies grew, both among the elite sections of the minorities and among urban middle class Hindus. The Congress, far from combating these trends, tried to accommodate them with disastrous consequences. From this to the instigation of mass violence in 1984 was but a short step. Failure to implement the law of the land in the aftermath of the carnage further eroded faith in democratic processes. The deliberate opening of the Babri

Masjid boosted the VHP's campaign. Compromises with Muslim communal forces over the Shah Bano and Salman Rushdie controversies provided much ammunition to the RSS *et al*, who wept hypocritical tears over the plight of Muslim women. The permission given to the *shilanyas* ceremony in Ayodhya last year, despite the court order, the political alliance of the Congress with the VHP/BJP in the Faizabad constituency – all point to its fatal proclivity to compromise with communalism. The organisational degeneration of the Congress was another factor contributing to its decline. The lack of inner-party democracy made it impossible to bring about a change in leadership without challenging it in a general election in the country. The desertion by the Congress of its own platform – the nationalist ideals of socialism, secularism and democracy – contributed to the crisis of legitimacy for the Indian state.

Since centrist Indian politics is grounded on those ideals and since that platform is now denuded of organisational expression, we are now in the midst of a political breakdown. But this breakdown contains the potential of a radical redefinition of Centrism, either in a Right or a Left-wing direction. The space for and the parties of the Centre have now bifurcated with the Congress willing to ally with the Right, and the Janata Dal (JD) being obliged to move Leftward. (The alliance with the BJP in the last election was the latter's worst and most criminal blunder, and in this its ineptitude was compounded by the failure even on the Left to comprehend the explicitly fascist nature of the RSS.) But now, because precisely of its weakness, the JD and National Front leadership is inclined towards radical populist measures such as the Mandal reform. This decision along with the decision to obstruct the fascist onslaught on Babri Masjid, has laid the foundation for the emergence of an alternative and socially dynamic form of Centrist politics. And V.P. Singh and Mulayam Singh Yadav, whatever be their fate henceforth, have indeed rendered signal service to the Union of India.

Perhaps some of us care to remember that it was a Sikh officer, Lt. Gen. R.S. Dayal, who was given charge of 'Operation Bluestar' in 1984, and that it was a Sikh head of state who took formal responsibility for it. That Lt. Gen. Mohammad Zaki is in charge of operations in J&K, and that it required a Julio Rebeiro to keep the Punjab police together in a critical period. That Indira Gandhi trusted all her guards regardless of community (and paid the price for it), and that Sant Longowal gave his life for the 'crime' of

preaching communal harmony. If the RSS/VHP/BJP is allowed to destroy or shift the Babri Masjid, it would make nonsense of all these persons' basic commitment to the secular Constitution of India despite what we think of their ideas and activities.

On the night of October 30, V P Singh appeared on national television – to his credit, for he must have known that he would appear an exhausted man. It will always redound to India's credit that a Hindu Prime Minister and Chief Minister, working with a largely Hindu police force, valiantly defended a mosque from the frenzied hordes let loose by the 'Hindu' Ayatollahs of the RSS. On the 30th indeed V P Singh appeared as a man who had drained the cup of Hindu communal hatred to the dregs. For all his failings, this step was a mark of great courage. It remains now for the citizens of India to decide whether India should degenerate into a communal dictatorship or revive itself as a genuine secular, socialist republic.

7

DECEMBER 30, 1990, MAINSTREAM

Rethinking Secularism

Co-authored by Bhagwan Josh and Purshottam Agrawal
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A new cultural basis for Indian nationhood, which respects castes, genders, religions and the marginalized is needed for a true democratic revival.

Symptoms of Breakdown

The allround crisis of the Indian polity, with its many social, economic and political aspects, has finally burst into the open. Today, many people are challenging the Constitution and the way in which this has been operated over the past decades. There is an insurgent situation prevailing in Kashmir and Assam and the NorthEast in general. In Punjab, the Khalistani movement has succeeded in pressuring even the Central Government. In central India and the Gangetic plain, the RSS/BJP/VHP have unleashed unprecedented violence against Indian Muslims, and launched a tirade against what they call "pseudosecularism". In the process, the state machinery has become increasingly subject to communal/ethnic/regional sentiments and rendered ineffective. The Indian Army has taken on what is now accepted as a stable role in policing Indian society. Today, what is at stake is not the future of this or that government, but the concept of a united India, and the very political structure known as the Indian Union.

Why is there so much ethnic and communal unrest and dissatisfaction with the concept of India? Part of the reason lies in the inheritance of a fragment of the colonial empire, without restructuring the concept of the Nation. In fact, the first expression of this failure was Partition. The

national leadership, while articulating popular grievances and awakening socialdemocratic aspirations, nevertheless remained elitist, constrained both by class/caste interests and the highly limited franchise permitted by the colonial rulers. It sought to manipulate communalism (of all varieties) instead of combating it, failed to infuse political radicalism with farreaching social reform, and capitulated to an undemocratic partition, that illusory solution to very genuine problems. Thereafter, it framed a republican constitution incorporating democratic norms and secularliberal notions of citizenship, judicial administration, and social equity. And the Indian state, under Congress control, embarked upon a path of industrialization which it called "socialistic".

But the pattern of "modernization" turned out uneven and socially discriminatory. Regional imbalances and the inequities of status were retained and accentuated. Entire regions and zones such as the NorthEast, Jharkhand, tribal areas in Central India, and Jammu & Kashmir were left underdeveloped, even while being exploited to the full for the ruling elite. Over centralisation has created a situation where the pursuit of state power at the centre becomes ruthless this encourages the development of authoritarian and violent brands of politics such as communalism. It also becomes both the cause for and result of an erosion of democratic functioning within the hegemonic party such has been the history of the Congress. Thus, dictatorial parties and persons could equate their own interests with the interests of the nation.

Behind the mask of liberal individualism and citizenship, traditionally oppressed castes/communities, and women in general, were denied adequate representation in the affairs of state administration. Untouchability was formally abolished in the Constitution, but the law banning the practice of it was enacted only eight years after Independence, and honoured more in the breach. The promise of reservations gave muchneeded legitimacy to the state, but governments failed to provide the educational and other facilities required to make such action effective. (Threequarters of the population comprising the Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs) and Other Backward Communities (OBCs) possess only 11 per cent representation in Class I services of the country. This despite the constitutional provision for 22.5 per cent reservation for just SC/STs alone.)

PseudoNationalism

In the hands of the Congress, the Constitution became an instrument for the pursuit of class/caste interests. Political and economic decentralisation, an ideal dear to Gandhiji's heart, and important not as a matter of administrative convenience, but as a prerequisite for the harmonious distribution of political and economic power, was ignored in the interests of *'savarna'* capitalism. (It is significant that the share in trade and commerce of the upper castes is 97 per cent, whereas the remaining 3 per cent of business is held by 85 per cent of the population. There are no Muslim owners among the top 50 business houses in the country.) Nationalism became a slogan used for the reinforcement of the privileges of the ruling elites, including big business, landlords, rich peasants, and their political representatives. Any attempt at articulating local grievances against the undemocratic polity hence came to be crushed in the name of the "Nation". The caste consciousness and communalism of the upper castes could easily masquerade as "nationalism", but the resistance of the oppressed was dubbed "casteism" and antinationalism. The last Congress government repeatedly referred to the Jharkhand and Gorkhaland movements as "antinational". As per its convenience, the party "High Command" tarred the leadership of the Jammu & Kashmir National Conference and the Akalis with the same brush.

Today, we have a situation where the government fails to protect citizens lives, but questions their patriotism if they appeal to international sentiment; in which, six years after the single worst communal carnage since 1947, the instigators of the violence receive open political and state protection. (This blatant contempt for law and the basic norms of justice has had profoundly negative repercussions for the credibility of the Union of India in the Punjab.) Multinationals like Union Carbide can shamelessly manipulate the statemachinery to evade criminal liabilities in the horrendous Bhopal gas leak, but their victims are tortured with neglect and harassment by their own government. We are also witness to the most blatant extraconstitutional intervention since Independence, of big business in national politics, with gigantic sums of money being used for the purchase of Members of Parliament (MPs) and the funding of RSS/BJP/VHP Babri Masjid demolition campaign. Clearly, a significant section of the ruling classes has decided that democracy is no longer convenient for the

perpetuation of their vested interests.

The Need for Secular Nationalism

Thus, the experience of our past was building up to the current explosion. Legitimate dissatisfaction with the patterns of development and the collapse of civic and judicial administration have been channelized into the politics of secessionism and communalism, and, in certain cases, a mixture of the two. The fate of independent India as an entity has hitherto depended, and still depends, upon a secular and democratic nationalism, a popular consensus with the content and orientation of balance, harmony and social justice. Such a consensus existed (*in potentia*) for four long decades. The majority of the longsuffering masses were prepared to wait for the realization of these ideals, as long as they had faith in a democratic state which could act as an instrument of their aspirations. This is the reason why populist slogans such as *"Garibi hatao"* could give the Congress such powerful support.

The need for secular nationalism was linked to the need both to harmonise the five main religious traditions Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and (Neo) Buddhism – as well as recognise and realise the egalitarian aspirations of the hitherto oppressed castes, ethnic groups, and Indian women as a whole. In part, this implied a democratic (as opposed to an authoritarian) reform and rejuvenation of Hinduism, and all the above religious traditions, a cultural revolution which could transform their intensely hierarchical sensibility into a new, philosophical acceptance of the modern concept of human equality. But the Congress and the elite intelligentsia (with a few noteworthy exceptions) failed to launch any attempt towards such a renewal of Indian society and civilisation. It further confused the situation by adding the label of "socialism" to the Constitution during the Emergency.

The Violation of the Consensus

The continued and ruthless violation of the national consensus, has, after a long period of unrest among the socially and politically marginalised citizens, finally created a crisis for the Indian state as a whole. All these years, an over centralised polity and the domination of ruling classes,

castes and regions (the Centre over the states, the North over the South and NorthEast, the uppercastes over the SC/STs, backward classes and minorities; the capitalists, landlords and rich peasants over the working masses; and patriarchal culture over women) has operated through unwritten codes, with the written and overtly liberal constitution functioning as the facade of these unwritten codes.

The practice of secularism, instead of being expressed as a creative dialogue between religious traditions, degenerated into the granting of concessions to competing communalisms. Now, since the Indian State's practice of "secular nationalism" is under challenge, the Hindu *Rashtravadis* are attempting to present for the ruling elites and upper castes/classes a fresh theory of nationalism, whose function will be the preservation of existent forms of domination within a new political code. Thus, behind the contemptuous phraseology of "votebanks" and "appeasement" lies the disgust with the phenomenon of voting and democracy itself, and the desire to terrorise and blackmail the minorities and manipulate the religious sentiments of Hindus for propelling the RSS into power and to inaugurate an unashamedly despotic version of the Indian Republic. It is necessary to add that the Muslim communalists have aided and abetted this design by their stridently sectarian and patriarchal forms of mobilisation, especially over the Shah Bano and *Satanic Verses* controversies.

Understanding Communalism

Today, questions about secularism and communalism have to be set within this context. Thus, if communalism is seen, not as an arithmetical total of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communalisms but as a political expression of an authoritarian and patriarchal culture, then several seemingly paradoxical phenomena, inherent in the communalist expression of social and psychic frustration become explicable. It is not accidental that despite their apparent mutual contradictions, all brands of communalism share a highly oppressive attitude towards women. Similarly, the glorification of violence and cults of martyrdom, which are expressions of the same culture, can also bear functional and psychological utility for the politics of resistance to both real and perceived oppression. Thus, a continued trampling upon the basic civil rights of minorities can only strengthen the communal

patriarchs and elite castes within such communities, as has obviously happened in the case of Indian Muslims.

Conversely, an exclusively patriarchal content to nationalism will inevitably render it oppressive and communal. (Given the cultural and ethnic demography of India, it also becomes understandable that Hindu communalism can masquerade as hegemonic nationalism). In addition, communalism gives illegitimate power to the more intolerant and conservative among religious leaders, raising them to the level of "natural representatives", not democratically responsible. This inherently militates against political democracy. In sum, communalism is the very antithesis of a democratic culture, and its habitual paranoia about the "other" community is an externalization of the latent fear of "its own" women and oppressed "lower" strata.

Indian Secularism

The Indian version of secularism signified the peaceful co existence of religious communities and a creative interaction between various traditions. It did not imply state atheism, or an active opposition to religion, or even a ban on the public display of religious sentiment, (as long as this was nonaggressive). It is this positive connotation of Indian secularism which has been systematically destroyed by the violent and despotic cults of all the communalists. And it is this connotation alone which must be reconstructed and evolved further in order to understand and deal with the religious aspect of disrupted social and political relations in the current crisis. Any notion of secularism for which religion is a purely private affair of the individual fails to comprehend that religion plays an important role as a source of ethical inspiration and in the creation of social identities.

How is this possible? To begin with, it is necessary to recognise that the peoples of the Indian subcontinent carry with them not a single identity, but multifarious and overlapping identities. These include identities of caste, region, dialect, gender, and community. Whereas gender is natural (although gender oppression is certainly not), the rest are historically created, with varying lineages. The categories of the "Nation"; of monolithically defined communities; castefederations or estates; and classalliances and class organisations originated in the late colonial period and carried political functions within the context of a retreating

imperialism. Sometimes these identities conflict with each other, pulling groups and individuals in different directions: thus, women as oppressed gender and women as members of this or that patriarchally defined caste or community; Muslims as Pakistanis versus Muslims as Bengalis; Assamese as casteHindus and as inhabitants of an underdeveloped region; NeoBuddhists as selfconsciously rejuvenated citizens versus NeoBuddhists as "scheduled" castes, etc.

Upon the older, precolonial matrix of identities were superimposed two new sets of identities. One was linked to the language of the colonial administration, coloured both by its motivations and inadequate comprehension of Indian culture. The British also introduced enumerative categories through the censuses, something which profoundly influenced the selfconsciousness of the Indian intelligentsia. The second set of identities was also a product of the colonial churning of Indian society. They included the Nation, the community and the casteblocs, and became political forms of expression of the popular striving for change. Because of wide disparities in wealth, education and opportunity, these structures came to be dominated by an elite intelligentsia, often mobile as leaders within different categories.

But the different categories had an uneasy coexistence, because not all social and political elites had a desire for democratic renewal. Hence, the construction of monolithic "communities" became the political project of the more conservative elements within the different religious traditions, and their version of religion was more of a politicalcultural project, quite at variance with the older, folk traditions. The communal sensibility influenced the broader nationalist consciousness, particularly because of the dominant social position of communal leaders and the restricted franchise. (This gave exclusive political privileges to the castes/classes to which these leaders belonged.)

The national movement proved unequal to the task of blunting the reactionary politics of the uppercaste and feudal/usurious elements. For these groups a democratic consensus within a republican constitution, which gave the oppressed even a glimmer of hope for a social democracy, was unacceptable. They floated alternative, exclusivist concepts of nationhood, such as "Hindu Rashtra" and the "TwoNation Theory", to try and co-opt popular aspirations. The undemocratic Partition strengthened the reactionary elements on both sides of a nation divided into two states.

Whereas the direct control by Muslim communalists over statepower in Pakistan led to a rapid slide towards autocracy, in India the struggle between the conflicting socialdemocratic and authoritarian traditions of nationalism was more prolonged.

Conclusion

This struggle has been going on in India, both within and sometimes outside the plane of the Constitution for the past four decades. The struggle for equality and democratic functioning has lain at the core of the conflict between the "upper" and "lower" casteblocs; the central government and the state governments; the backward regions and the state as a whole; between city and country; women and the patriarchal structure of society and polity; rich and poor, etc. The current political turmoil is but the latest (and most serious) expression of the critical stage that the struggle has reached. If it is not recognised explicitly even now, no amount of state militarism (or Hindu communalism) can prevent the breakup of the country. Therefore, the positive aspects of the nationalist platform have to be resurrected and made the basis of a renewal of democratic commitment by the people towards their own future.

Thus, tensions about identities in India are expressed through various different codes. It is necessary to strive for an alignment of those codes which express the socialdemocratic aspirations of the oppressed factor in our society, and isolate those codes which lead to more violence and authoritarian politics. As a starting point, a consensus may be notionally accepted which will include the basic values of nonviolence, women's liberation, the end of caste oppression, democratic practices, and the freedom of the individual. Any consensus which violates these values will negate the concept of democratic secular nationalism, which is the only possible basis for the continued existence of the Union of India. An acceptance of this concept will, on the other hand, help heal the religious divide, because the values we have outlined are just as much contained within religious traditions as are their negative features. Our current experience of perverse religiosity owes much to the products of patriarchy, communalism, violence, and a eurocentric understanding of secularism. This consensus can hold India together, and begin the long and painful process of healing the wounds inflicted on society by the decades of

'*savarna*' capitalist rule. Here are suggestions for what must be done:

(a) The federal nature of the Indian polity must be reiterated, with a promise made to restructure the balance of power between centre and states within a specified time period. The aspirations of backward regions must be addressed.

(b) The legitimate aspirations of ethnic and religious identities must be recognised on the ground of the above mentioned nonaggressive consensus. This redressal too, must be timebound.

(c) The question of women's equality, embodied in concrete legal and constitutional norms, should be placed at the centre of a debate on secularism, so as to construct a new cultural basis for Indian nationhood.

(d) The prolonged quest for social equality, justice and redressal of grievances by victims of communal/caste violence; and by the victims of environmentalindustrial oppression must meet with the promise of realisation, again, within the foreseeable future.

The four items of this agenda should form the pillars of national, secular renewal as the basis of India's democratic republic.

8

SEPTEMBER 18, 1991, TIMES OF INDIA

Leninism: Prehistory of Socialism

Those who mourn for the Soviet party-state need to critically re-examine the past, and the communist tradition.

As populist nationalism sweeps across the Soviet Union, one is reminded of the cyclical trajectories of Mother Russia's history. In the early twentieth century, as four medieval empires disintegrated, it was Russian social democracy which put the right to self-determination of nations on the global agenda, including in Woodrow Wilson's 14 points. Today's Russian democracy (even more conflict-ridden than its predecessor), once more, announces itself, with waning enthusiasm, in favour of the right of nations to secede.

As a tragic irony, the secession of the Baltic nations marks the formal end of the era of Stalinism, just as their secession in 1917-18, duly approved by the Commissar of Nationalities, Stalin marked the end of the era of the Tsars. And as the Bolsheviks, after conceding the independence of the Baltic states, Finland and Poland, preserved what they could of the empire, so also will the Russian nationalists of today use boundary disputes to preserve the terrain of the Soviet Union. As chauvinism, stifling bureaucracy, corruption and even anti-Semitism lingered on within the socialist order, so also will they soon make their appearance in ex-Comrade Yeltsin's new order. As he derides the communist bureaucrats rushing about 'like cockroaches', blaming one another for the coup, his own communist past will remind us that in this respect, his denunciations of the old order make him the First Cockroach.

Some of Lenin's views on the system he inaugurated were prophetic. On the new juridical structure, he wrote in 1912: "We don't know how to conduct a public trial for rotten bureaucracy, for this, all of us, and particularly the People's Commissariat for Justice, should be hung on stinking ropes. And I have not yet lost all hope that one day she shall be hung for this, *and* deservedly so." In the notes known as his testament (1922), he apologized to the workers of Russia for failing to act decisively on the nationalities question.

About the state, he said "...the apparatus we call ours is, in fact, still quite alien to us; it is a bourgeois and Tsarist hotchpotch and there has been no possibility of getting rid of it in the course of the past five years without the help of other countries"; and, "it is quite natural that in such circumstances, the 'freedom to secede from the union', by which we justify ourselves will be a mere scrap of paper unable to defend the non-Russians from the onslaught of that really Russian man, the Great Russian chauvinist."

The founder of the Soviet Union was sensitive to the conservative nature of Russian culture. But the same Lenin would say that his party's task was, "to study the state-capitalism of the Germans, to spare no effort in copying it and not shrink from adopting dictatorial methods to hasten the copying of it...even more than Peter hastened the copying of Western culture by barbarous Russians and we must not hesitate to use barbarous methods in fighting barbarism." Others had foreseen the dangers of the Tsarist inheritance. A Turkic Bolshevik, Sultan Galiev, was tried for treason in 1923 for advocating a federative CPSU, a separate communist party of Turkestan (comprising the five central Asian republics), and a colonial International independent of the Comintern. Ironically, it is the latest rebellion of the Russian people which has emboldened the Turkic peoples to assert the rights which the Bolsheviks had assured them in 1917.

The problem of legitimacy bedevilled the Soviet Union from its birth. Power was seized by the Bolsheviks in the name of the Soviets (Workers Councils) in 1917, in which they had won a slender coalitional majority, but the decision to seize it was taken, not at the Congress of Soviets of October 25 but by the party leadership on the 10th, by a vote of 10 to two. During the civil war (1918-21), and after, most state decisions emanated in the party, rather than the Soviets, and the "dictatorship of the proletariat" came to mean the dictatorship of the party.

Those who mourn for the party-state need critically to re-examine Soviet history, and communist tradition. Thus, in their famous Manifesto, Marx and Engels, had written: "The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties...they do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement." In his last speech to the Comintern in 1922, Lenin had sharply criticised its resolution on the structure and politics of the CPs, as being, "too Russian...thoroughly imbued with the Russian spirit". "That is why it is quite unintelligible to foreigners", added Lenin, "and they cannot be content with hanging it in a corner like an icon and praying to it. Nothing will be achieved that way." Sadly, the intellectual apathy of too many Leninists is exceeded only by their theoretical absolutism. Marx and Lenin indeed became icons, and their critical spirit was forgotten.

Mikhail Gorbachev may be a convenient scapegoat for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Actually, he represents a democratic part of Russian socialism, encumbered as it has been with its authoritarian history. He is the last in a long line of Russian autocrats, in the sense that he derived his powers from above, from the state. (His most far-reaching blunder was in not taking a popular mandate for the presidentship in 1988, thus gifting democratic legitimacy to the demagogue Boris Yeltsin). From such a position, he did the best that any leader could do – he assisted its demise with the least bloodshed. Russian socialists are now obliged to return to the people, who have reasserted two seminal principles of the 1917 revolution—democracy and self-determination.

Decades hence, the Leninist tradition will be looked upon as the prehistory of socialism, its greatest failure, the incapacity to construct stable, self-legitimising political institutions, and a democratically planned economy. Perhaps the symbols of its archaism, the corpses of Lenin and Mao, embalmed like the popes of medieval Christianity, will remain in some museum. Truly, the traditions of the past weigh like a nightmare on the living. But the Russian people have, once again this century, shaken the world with their questions for the future.

9

APRIL 6, 1992, THE PIONEER

Is the media ready for an open debate on its functioning?

Can we imagine a situation where cassette recorders, cameras and video-cameras turn up in factories, educational institutions, bureaucratic offices, police stations, editorial conferences, and other such places where social conflict is expressed on a daily basis? Why has it taken so many years for our legislators to open a small (and duly theatricised) segment of their deliberation to their voters? After all, they are not normally known for their shyness.

Similarly, could we ever hope for a really open debate in the newspapers, involving their owners, staff and readership, about how 'news' is created? How about a televised debate with the owners and editors of the Hindi press in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh on their coverage of the so-called *'karsewa'*? Would cameras be permitted in torture cells, to show us some of the means by which the "unity and integrity of the nation" is maintained? Or in the offices of ministers, when contracts are discussed? Why is it an inconceivable proposition that a newspaper be edited and distributed by its readership through a democratic co-operative? Or video-systems be put at the disposal of political groups?

We know the answers to these questions. The functional and technical structure of the media are in toto, reflexes of their social form. In this form, as organs of the monologue of mediatised, theatrified and sanitised images and information, it cannot ever permit the use and alteration of their

technologies for real communication, for speech with response, and for a genuine discourse of social reality. One consequence of the emergence of societies based upon mass production has been the birth of the 'consciousness Industry'. Such societies carry two outstanding features: One demographic, the other political.

The first is the development of mass urban conglomerates, with their educational structure 'disciplining' the proletarian underclass to suit the needs of modern manufacture. The second includes the disestablishment of God as the legitimator of power (the end of Divine Right), and the arrival of the ideal of popular rule, 'self-determination,' and so on. The conflict over the definition of conflict over the definition of 'people' created the need for propaganda. At the same time, the very notion of popular rule has carried subversion potential, with the underprivileged often dreaming of the socialisation of democracy, the substantive realisation of liberty.

It is the tension between the promise and the reality of democracy, the potential liberation from drudgery that technology promises, and the actual life experience of drudgery, conflict and technologically produced disaster, that provides the space for the intervention of what we call the media. The media are no more a basically neutral form for the dissemination of ideas and culture than was methyl isocyanate gas a basically neutral form of insecticide. They perform a specific function in the kind of mass society we have talked of, the function of monologous communication, of speech without reply, of mass production of sentiments, symbols, and the manipulation of the human mind in a manner suitable to the needs of capitalism.

The media is the collective advertisement of this contradictory social reality, in a word, simultaneously, the instrument and the form of the industrialisation of the mind. The media carries with the aura of 'truth' – (how much truth did *Pravda* really purvey?). The myth about the printed word being the last word, and the assumption that seeing is believing, etc., are the axioms upon TV functioning. Depending upon how the subjects – producers of the images, words, messages and symbols – assess the level of intelligence of the objects – the sheep-like audiences who 'consume' these products and whose responses are either negligible or preordained— the media can even extend what film criticism calls the "suspension of disbelief" into 'real life'. Thus, as political beings, voters were expected to actually exercise a choice for say, NTR or Dipika, suspending their

knowledge that these were not deities, but mere humans who enacted roles of Gods and Goddesses. So, the media can create a situation of complicity among subject and audience where political decisions are sought to be based upon pure fabrication.

Just as the theatre of the electro-magnetic waves has stepped out of the idiot box to mingle with the idiots, so also has the 'reality' of politics receded into the realm of theatre. 'Spectacle' is the word Henri Lefebvre proposed, to fit the present form of mass consumption, where news, images, packaging, architecture, ambiences and glitter, star lives and 'beautiful living', all come together in a festival, a permanent theatre, celebrating consumption.

It is the spectacle which makes it possible for a system based upon artificial scarcity to promise the pseudo-utopia of 'plenty', and for the daily life of drudgery to hope for the promise of 'open spaces' and 'free time'.

What we get therefore is not what we might want to know, but what is deemed fit for our knowledge and sentiment. Indeed, sentiment is interspersed with 'fact' at every step, even in the mode of the 'headline': thus, a survey of the opinions of less than 300 persons in some parts of Delhi becomes converted to a general truth about the 'opinion of Delhiites'. It is not truth, thus, that the media manufactures, but the new ideological product known as 'credibility'. This is the lasting contribution of the advertising industry. Not for nothing do power seekers hire advertisers who specialise in the art of seduction and repulsion.

One of the essential preconditions of the mind industry is the intellectual impact of the Enlightenment, that is, the advent of the notion of the 'independent mind'. (Ironically, this is the precondition for the new hegemony). Democracy created the need for persuasion. And the emergence of basic industrial infrastructure and electronics made it both possible and necessary to reach millions of minds. It is an interesting reflection that for those to whom it is directed, political and commercial propaganda are virtually free.

The mind industry's main business is not to sell its product, it is to sell the existing order, to train consciousness, to domesticate and benumb, to co-opt opposition and imagination, to tame the ghost of real speech and of social (as opposed to formal) democracy. "Material exploitation must camouflage itself in order to survive, immaterial exploitation has become its necessary corollary," stated Enzenzberger. The modern industrial

system has now begun the expropriation of the brain, and, contrary to its claims, what is being abolished is not exploitation, but our awareness of exploitation.

But the mind industry has its own pitfalls for the system. The intellect must be developed before it can be exploited. Consciousness can be reproduced and manipulated by industrial means, but never produced except by creative minds whose very nature lies in innovation, the invention of alternatives. No administration can trust the media workers all the way, since they are potential troublemakers, and require handling, by means of blacklists, blackmail, over-exposure, stardom, etc. As it proliferates consciousness, the media spawns its own contradictions.

But for the media workers who try to incorporate moments of genuine reciprocity in what is otherwise the monologue of the mighty and the dialogue of the deaf, there is more at stake in their effort than their own future.

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JANUARY 16, 1994, THE SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA

The Tenth Winter

Rules must apply to all, and most of all, they should uphold a respect for human life and dignity

Those familiar with the streets of Delhi would have noticed the contempt with which police vehicles, large and small, treat traffic rules, to say nothing of the ubiquitous white Ambassadors bearing the middle bureaucracy. This is not only true of officialdom – buses stop in the middle of the road, stop signals are regularly violated, and lanes totally ignored. There is no awareness that traffic rules are for everyone's safety. When the very authority which is paid to uphold these laws does the opposite, when the lack of civic sense appears to be all-pervasive, one begins to wonder if there is some deeper malaise at work.

Some forms of social derangement underpin all other ills. The gap between the claim to being law-governed and the actual observance of rules is one of them. Traffic rules are the least of them. Electoral laws and the Penal Code regulations governing incitement have, until the last general elections, been flouted without compunction. It remains to be seen whether the Election Commission can prevent the misuse of religion and election symbols in future.

When certain top police officers took to preaching inter-religious warfare after they retired, one wondered how they could have functioned impartially while in service. College principals engage in the practice of discretionary admissions, bypassing established procedures, and inculcating amongst the youth the gentle art of queue-jumping. Opinion

makers applaud the handcuffing of students who cheat in examinations, but not much is heard of the need to make accountable those teachers who neglect their classes. Elite groups of businessmen and officials mysteriously obtain prime urban land at throwaway prices. The list is endless.

Why grumble at all this? The flouting of rules is accepted with various degree of resignation. Like black money, it is assumed to have its functions. What the ruling castes/classes do not realise is that this attitude has an indelible impact upon popular perceptions of right and wrong. I remember as a child seeing Pandit Nehru and senior leaders moving about in the city and at public exhibitions with ease. Today's leaders and senior officials live in glorified prisons. Do they realise that this predicament is of their own making?

Across the enormous linguistic distances in our society, certain messages get through clearly enough – some people live above the rules, while the rest of us have to negotiate them somehow. And for the mass media, there are some crusades which may be launched, while grievous issues may conveniently be forgotten.

Thus, Naxalite violence is awful, but if a few thousand people are murdered in a couple of days in the name of God Almighty, this is unfortunate, but inevitable. The greater the enormity, the larger the number of publicists who may be found rationalising it, using it to make money, or putting their consciences to sleep. I was aghast at the number of gruesome and provocative photographs published by the Gujarati press in Surat, where I happened to be resident in December 1992. In Bombay, Doordarshan telecast a Marathi programme on Shivaji's weapons on one of the worst mornings during the riots a year ago.

I sometimes wish that intellectuals who rationalise brutality could be made witnesses to these 'nation building' activities when they take place; as for instance, when little girls were heinously done in on a train at Udhna, near Surat, on December 9, 1992 (the details are too painful to recount). But I doubt whether this will make any difference. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, Hitler's notorious terror arm, which presided over the annihilation of European Jews, once asked for about a hundred victims to be machine-gunned in front of him. The carnage caused him to faint and suffer a nervous fit. But there was no change in his character or activities.

This is the tenth winter since 1984, when the slaughter of innocents in

India's capital took place – an event which, in my view, carried as much import for 'Midnight's Children' as Partition did for our seniors. (May I repeat here, in passing the demand that the ban on *The Satanic Verses* be lifted?). For years afterwards, there was a conspiracy of silence about it, matched by the shameless determination of the national government to thwart the judicial process. There is no sign that Parliament will even pass a resolution of condolence. None of the national parties has carried out a sustained agitation for justice.

And does it sit easy upon the conscience of the politicians making the latest gestures in that direction that they were themselves the prime movers of violence and mayhem that is directed against Muslim citizens? These matters are not party issues any more. They concern the legitimacy, not of this or that government, but of the Indian Union. Those who swear by national unity must seriously consider the effect upon state institutions of the undermining of constitutional rules and processes.

Let me underscore the difference between civil and criminal law. The first concerns disputes within relationships of a social or commercial nature. The second relates to the physical safety of the citizens and their property. If there is no such uniform criminal law in India – and such is indeed the case factually, though not technically – there can be no common civil law either, and the moral fabric of society will be torn apart. Yet there is no life without optimism, and Indian society has always carried its own antidotes. I shall make reference again to Gujarat. The *purohit* of a small temple in Baroda wrote a moving account of his anguished reactions to the events of December 6, 1992. His views were humane, compassionate and steeped in his own religiosity. He remains a common man, worthy of the respect of many of our VIPs. A news report dated January 12, 1994 tells us that tens of thousands of citizens in Sidhpur, Mehsana, took a public pledge of peace, with killers openly repenting their crimes and the families of the victims declaring their forgiveness. The ends of justice and social order requires nothing more.

In the tenth winter since 1984 and the first since the demolition of the desolate Babri Masjid, the citizens of Sidhpur have reminded us of the delicate, tenuous, and profoundly ethical nature of the ties that bind us. Rules must apply to everyone, or there is no point having them at all. And the first rule has to be a respect for human life and dignity.

11

JANUARY 30, 1994, THE SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA

Underground infernos: An old story

Disregard for human life and indiscriminate profiteering have been the bane of mining in India

At 10 pm on January 27, about 500 feet deep inside Bihar's New Kenda mine, Mukhi Dusadh wrote his last message for posterity, and stuck it under the band of his watch. Overhead, some hours later, police-controlled crowds, women identified bodies, rescue teams braved the hazards to descend into the pits, and officials stressed the fortuitous aspects of the disaster. The unions have claimed that the miners were not issued with mandatory gas masks, swift rescue operations were not undertaken and that regular checking of gas levels were not done. It is under question whether crucial safety measures like sand stowing and ventilation procedures, were being implemented. Whatever be the answers, it is worth remembering that so far as Indian mining practices are concerned there is nothing new under the sun, or underground.

In December 1992, when the government announced that American experts would be called in to 'tackle' the Jharia underground fire, it failed to mention that this fire began in the Khas Jharia colliery over six decades ago, in November 1930. A correspondent reported: "smoke with flames ... issuing though several gaps and cracks ... local people ... leaving their houses forever... it has ... gone out of control...". In 1935 the fire spread to Kusunda Nayadee colliery, and Jharia became the most notorious example of a general malaise.

An explosion in the Railway's Joktiyabad colliery in Giridih in 1935 was

caused by a leaking oxygen cylinder coming into contact with an open country lamp. Fifty-three persons were burnt to death. In January 1963, 37 died in an explosion in the Loyabad colliery in Jharia. A correspondent described the rescue efforts at Loyabad: "The relief parties showed the utmost heroism … Heart-rending scenes were witnessed at the pit mouth where many women were present … A strong police picket was posted to keep under control the large crowd … Pathetic scenes were witnessed at the hospital where doctors … treated the injured, many of whom suffered from gas-poisoning."

Representing the managing agents, Bird and Co … at the condolence meeting, Sir Edward Benthall, member-to-be of the Viceroy's Council, announced plans for a monument to the dead, adding that the tragedy was "an accident, pure and simple… for which no one can be blamed". In February 1936, the government counted 45 fires in 29 collieries in the eastern coal belt, most of them due to spontaneous combustion, in turn attributable to unsatisfactory mining methods. It considered flooding the coal fields with river water, but gave up the idea as this would put them out of action for 18 months.

The Loyabad inquiry report suggested the placement of hosepipes, sand, and telephone cables in the mines. The New Kenda management had not, apparently, heeded the lessons of a 56-year- old disaster. But even in 1937, disciplinary action against the manager of Joktiyabad for the firing of liquid oxygen without prior watering was resisted by a manager's deputation which insisted that that disasters were "a concomitant of the working of mines". The worst ever calamity was in December 1936 at Andre Yule's Poidih colliery in Asansol – 207 persons, including 63 women, were killed by an explosion which hurled pit cages to the top from depths of nearly 600 feet, destroying shaft-heads and killing three persons on the surface. The loss of life was the heaviest in any single mining disaster in India till then.

Mining experts had provided detailed warnings of these dangers in 1929 and 1930. Yet nothing could shake the cynicism of the coal companies, whether Indian or English. The fires were a consequence of irresponsible mining practices, connected to collapse in coal prices. One such practice was 'slaughter mining', or cutting coal from the underground pillars. The weakness of the pillars often led to roof collapses and spontaneous combustion, which may well have caused one of the most destructive fires

in the history of mining anywhere.

Despite the need for stringent safety measures, coal magnates and Bihar's nationalist newspaper *Searchlight* refused to accept sand stowing as a method combining safety with maximum extraction. "This will naturally add to the cost of extracting coal," they opined: repeating this position when the Burrows Committee on coal conservation was appointed. The Indian Colliery Owners Association insisted that the "alleged bad methods of mining" were due to the failure of government and the public to improve the "economic condition" of the industry, by which they meant their own profits. "To force the industry to introduce improved mining methods which are bound to add to the costs of production... is like placing the cart before the horse".

In 1992, some 70 underground fires raged in the Jharia field alone. The foreseeable environmental and social consequences of new projects such as the Piparwar mines, with Australian collaboration, are another subject altogether. But the disregard for human life is a never-ending story. In October 1993, it was reported that despite showing symptoms of monoxide poisoning, miners in the Moonidih mines in Dhanbad were continually being exposed to deadly levels of the gas due to unchecked fires near their pit faces; that these fires were caused by spontaneous combustion; that the management was ignoring regulations in order to increase output; that gas monitoring was not being done, and that there was every chance of fresh explosions.

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APRIL 27, 1994, THE PIONEER

Self-appointed Defenders of Islam must be careful

It all boils down to violence and civilised conduct. We are living neither under Sharia law, not the code of Manu

Ajit Bhattacharjea's article on the decline of Jamia Millia Islamia University's liberal tradition coupled with another epistolic exemplar of intolerance by Badrul Islam (*The Pioneer,* April 14) between them herald the revival of a long and painful controversy. Bhattacharjea is right to remind us of the humanist origins of Jamia during the first non-cooperation movement, and of the reformist aspirations of India's former President, Dr Zakir Husain. Badrul Islam, on the other hand, is still asserting his mythical and monolithic truth. At the risk of sounding trite, I shall use this opportunity to drive home certain arguments about minority rights. I write this on the assumption that Badrul Islam's views are not his alone, and that those who think like him are interested in the reactions of non-Muslim readers.

Jamia Millia provides Prof Mushirul Hasan with his bread and butter, says Badrul Islam, and he ought to maintain its decorum by respecting "the sentiments of the Muslim majority". (How does he know what these are?) He adds that Prof Hasan ought not to have spoken out in favour of Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*, demands an apology, and ends on the grand note of magnanimity. Prof Hasan did not speak in favour of the book (which he had every right to do). He merely opposed the ban. Why do persons like Islam insist on deliberately misreading Prof Hasan's words? In any case, by what norm does the airing of opinion become a violation

of decorum? If Jamia provides Prof Hasan with a livelihood, by the same token the Indian Constitution provides Badrul Islam with the freedom to air his own illiberal and often disgusting views.

If, say, the Bajrang Dal were to ask Badrul Islam to maintain the decorum due in the Indian polity by keeping his mouth shut, would he not seek protection under the democratic Constitution rather than from Islamic commandments? Democratic values would prompt me to come to his defence, even though I detest his views. But conservatives like him must consider the implications of their beliefs more rigorously.

Islam, we are told, enjoins the "taking to task" of Prof Mushirul Hasan for the sin he has committed. What sin? Who decides what a sin is? To say that the ban should be lifted is not the same thing as abusing the Prophet of Islam. But even such abuse cannot become the occasion for threats of violence. I insist on the right to blaspheme, and to criticise the contents of all texts, religious or otherwise.

Ambedkar's *Riddles of Hinduism* was said to have hurt the sentiments of Hindus, and the Quranic injunction to destroy idols and attack idol worshippers might have the same result. *Satyarth Prakash* by Swami Dayanand Saraswati contains uncomplimentary references to Jesus Christ and Guru Nanak. The Ramayana recommends the thrashing of women and Sudras, and the Bible proclaims the permanent collective guilt of the Jews for Christ's crucifixion. Can Badrul Islam state why these texts should not be banned? Or why those of us who object to any of the contents of these texts should not start beating up those who revere them?

What constitutes "taking to task"? Badrul Islam must remember that Prof Hasan was brutally assaulted on December 4, 1992. After the communal tragedies we have witnessed in recent years, it is shameful for him to condone such violence. He criticises *The Pioneer* for interfering with "the internal matters of Jamia". His entire argument is loaded with the dogma of internality. Even his commendations of forgiveness imply that no one else is capable of being forgiving. In a recently published interview, a Jamia student leader threatened to "hack Mushirul Hasan to pieces". Would Badrul Islam consider this an example of an internal matter? He refers to Prof Hasan as "a known Marxist". Apparently, known Marxists with Muslim names are not free of religiously motivated accusations. I submit that the violent attacks on Hindu journalists by *kar sevaks* on December 6, 1992, was not an internal matter for Hindus alone to react to. Along with

the destruction of the Babri Masjid, that event too, was my concern, as an Indian citizen.

Concepts such as human rights and constitutional liberties may not be found in the Quran. Yet, Badrul Islam seems to take them for granted when he talks of minority rights. The question he should confront is: If the "Muslim majority" (his phrase) will not grant democratic rights to minorities within its own ranks (reformers and liberals), how may it expect minority rights to prevail in the policy as a whole? The Assamese journalist, Amin-ur Rehman, has recently been subjected to death threats by fundamentalists. Will Badrul Islam speak out in defence of this man, even though he might disagree with his ideas?

In the end, it all boils down to the question of violence and civilised conduct. We are living neither under Sharia law, not the code of Manu. Badrul Islam is free to condemn apostates, blasphemers and Marxists. But quotes from Quran and Hadith cannot justify the instigation of violence against those whose opinions he finds outrageous. It is a crying shame that Government ministers too have indulged in such instigation, and that, far from protecting Prof Hasan, the administration shielded rank communalists who were and still are in clear violation of criminal law. We must now demand that it provide due protection for him to resume his functions.

Even those who publicly endorse the fatwa against Rushdie are guilty of murderous incitement. If, after December 4, 1992, the anti-Mushir lobby in Jamia have spoken of minority rights on a single instance (which I am sure they did on December 6), they will have transgressed their own communal logic. For they will have admitted that a sense of virtue and non-violent conduct among non-Muslims is the only stable basis for the safety of the minorities, and that therefore their monolithic doctrines are not the only fount of virtue.

The same points may be made differently to highlight the pitfalls of philosophical absolutism. Is it reasonable that those who practice spiritual apartheid (by harping on communal internality), should demand or expect social and political equality? Is it fair that persons or groups who disdain democracy as a value should take advantage of it to undermine its scope and content? Anyone who believes himself to be in possession of the Absolute Truth (which comes in various pigments), is walking in the footsteps of the Inquisition.

With the judgement over talaq, we will hear a new outcry about Muslim (read Muslim men's) rights. I hope that the self-appointed defenders of Islam restrain their verbal and physical expressions in the coming weeks. There are many citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim (and I count myself among them), who will support the liberation of Muslim women from the conservative straitjacket. Badrul Islam might pray for our eternal damnation. I shall still defend his civil liberties against the designs of the saffron brigade. But he may not commit, or instigate, violence against us. In such an event, democrats will have to ask for the strictest possible action under the law to restrain him and his kind. *Inshallah*, matters will not come to such a pass.

13

AUGUST 7, 1994, PIONEER ON SUNDAY

Remembering a true antagonist

Johann Georg Elser's plot to kill Hitler finds little or no mention in history because he belonged to the working class

On July 20, *The Pioneer* published a syndicated article from Hamburg, entitled 'Hitler escaped assassination by a few inches.' It was written in memory of Colonel von Stauffenberg, the man who carried out the ill-fated bomb attack on Hitler at his eastern headquarters 50 years ago. The aristocrat officer was indeed a brave man, whose actions demonstrated the intense dismay that Hitlerism had caused within the German army. But the statement that his attempt was the "closest anyone in Nazi Germany ever came to assassinating the fanatical dictator" is not true. Stauffenberg is justly remembered, but another German has been erased from literature of the resistance, although his plan came within minutes of saving the world from the horror of the Second World War. It was a plan of the conservative opposition, which became activated only when faced with military annihilation.

That other German was Johann Georg Elser (1903-1945), an artisan who had trained in carpentry and metalwork, became a cabinet-maker in 1922, and worked in clock factories through the Twenties. In 1928 he had joined a communist-led trade union as well as a front organisation called the RFK. He had been uninterested in ideological matters, however, attending a few meetings and spending more of his time flirting and playing music with a patriotic dance band. After Hitler's ascent to chancellorship in 1933, Elser's political contacts ceased altogether, and in 1936, some months after

the annexation of Austria and just before the Munich conference, this unknown man made the remarkable decision to assassinate Hitler. His resolve stiffened, and after the vivisection of Czechoslovakia he knew that the Nazis were driving Europe towards war.

Working alone, Elser, began stealing explosives from his factory. Learning that Hitler was due to address the Nazi Old Guard on November 8, in a Munich beer hall and restaurant called the Burgerbraukeller, he attended the occasion and observed the Fuhrer's movements. He then decided to plant a time-bomb in a pillar near the speaker's rostrum. In March 1938, shortly after the Nazis annexed what remained of Czechoslovakia, Elser resigned his job and returned to Munich with his life savings of 400 marks. He acquainted himself with the beerhall, and then took up residence at his parental home in the town of Konigsbronn. Confiding only in his father, he worked briefly in a stone quarry, augmenting both his knowledge and stock of explosives.

On August 5 1939, Elser began implementing his plan. Each night he would eat dinner in the beerhall, hide himself in a storeroom till it closed, and then emerge to work for some hours on the stone pillar inside which he intended to plant his bomb. He followed this routine for over 30 days, constructing a hollow space of 80 square centimetres with a small hinged door, neatly fitted to avoid detection. The space was lined with tin to prevent accidental damage and with cork, to muffle the sound of the clocks, of which two were planted to make doubly sure the device did not fail. He would carry all the rubble out in his hands every night, and because he was working on his knees, they soon became septic. On Monday, November 6, 1939 he set the mechanism to explode at 9.20 pm on Wednesday, November 8. Down to his last ten marks he took 30 marks from his sister in Stuttgart, and then proceeded to Constance on the Swiss border.

Hitler appeared on Wednesday, but cut short his speech to less than an hour, ending it before 9.10 pm, and leaving immediately thereafter. The bomb exploded at 9.20 killing a waitress and six members of the Nazi party. A gap of less than ten minutes had intervened to save Hitler.

Elser was examined by customs officials at the Swiss frontier, and was found carrying a picture postcard of the Burgerbraukeller, notes on munitions factories, and his old RFK membership card. This was his one mistake, motivated perhaps by sentiment. It was to cost him his life. He

was detained on suspicion of being a spy and sent to Munich. Meanwhile, the Gestapo had launched a manhunt for the unknown bomber. On November 13, after learning that the device had been planted at floor level, the head of the Gestapo's investigation commission asked to see Elser's knees. He confessed after 14 hours of interrogation.

Hitler himself, and Himmler, the head of the Gestapo, refused to believe the confession. On November 9, two British secret agents had been arrested near the Dutch border, and the Nazis were keen to use the bomb episode as part of their anti-British war propaganda. Moreover, it was politically damaging for them to admit that a German worker had planned and executed such a coup. Elser was subjected to another prolonged interrogation in Berlin, by which time his family had been rounded up. Despite brutal torture, he refused to doctor the truth, which was that he had acted alone, or to implicate anyone else. He was kept alive in order to give credence to a British plot to be fabricated in a trial the Nazis planned to hold after their victory. When defeat stared them in the face, he was shot on April 9, 1945.

In Elser's presence, reported the Gestapo, "One completely forgot that one was in the presence of a satanic monster". Coming from such a source, that comment is testimony to the ordinariness of this man, of whom the Czech litterateur J.P. Stern wrote, that to find Hitler's true antagonist, "We must look for a Nobody like himself, one who, sharing his social experiences yet lived and died on the other side of the moral fence." (We must thank this professor for being perhaps the sole writer to give Elser his due place in the historical record.) He had the stubbornness to refuse to salute the swastika, and to leave rooms whenever Hitler's speeches were being broadcast, yet his motivations remained unintellectual – for him, doing something meant to do something with his hands. Johann Gregor Elser did break down under torture, saying that if his plan had not succeeded, it was because it was not meant to succeed. May we blame a man in his desperate position for trying to survive? We also learn from the archives that he had begun attending church during the months prior to November 1939. He had prayed in order to feel more composed and had convinced himself that he would go to heaven "if I have had the chance to prove by my further life that I intended good. By my deed I wanted to prevent even worse bloodshed."

14

MAY 1997, ESSAY

Women on their own

The opposition to 33 per cent quota for women in Parliament is a manifestation of patriarchal insecurities

One of the memorable utterances of Sharad Yadav from the Janata Dal in his outburst against the Women's Reservation Bill was his scorn for the idea that *balkati mahila* (which roughly translates to women with cut hair and, presumably, not a reference to women mendicants or *sanyasins*) could represent "our women". This gave the game away, for it showed the deep insecurity among male politicians at the evaporation of their control over women. In this matter the leaders of the OBCs are no different from communalists of every hue, with their notorious efforts to impose "traditional" norms upon "their" women. References to the physiognomy of one's interlocutors are considered offensive in any civilised conversation. It is a telling commentary on the state of affairs that coarse behaviour towards women on the part of a senior leader of the ruling party in Parliament arouses only mild demurral rather than outrage.

Fifty years after independence, women in the Indian Parliament number 7 per cent of the total, the highest being 8 per cent in the 8th Lok Sabha. If this is not a shameful indicator of institutional infirmities, I don't know what is. There has been a 47.6 per cent increase in reported crimes against women between 1990 and 1995. In 1995, there were 4,659 dowry murders (why are they called "dowry deaths"?), and 12,458 cases of rape. If the interests of "weaker sections" are safe in the hands of Yadav and Co., there is very little to show for it. The will to power of the OBC elite exists

in inverse ratio to their capacity for statesmanship. This is unfortunate because the movement of the middle-castes for political power has been one of the hopeful developments of recent decades. But their successes seem to have strengthened patriarchal forces within peasant communities – witness the recent cases of young women from the backward castes being murdered by their caste panchayats for choosing their own life partners. OBC leaders do not condemn such events, because social reform has always taken a back seat to political power. The demand for women's representation has emerged not because of male goodwill but because of a global upsurge in women's mobilisation and the successes of the women's movement in India over the past two decades. The fact that women forced two state governments to introduce prohibition (even though one of these has since backtracked), shows that they are capable of using democratic institutions to influence political events.

Half of the human race possesses characteristics of a disadvantaged minority, with social disabilities which show no sign of being eroded without institutional safeguards. Reservations for women have an explosive potential for transformation. An opinion poll in August 1996 showed a massive 75 per cent support among women *and* men for such reservations. The experience of quotas in panchayats since 1993 has shown a groundswell of enthusiasm. A survey from Madhya Pradesh shows that the presence of women in panchayats led to greater urgency towards the provision of drinking water, the enforcement of the presence of schoolteachers, provision of health facilities, legal literacy and protection of the environment. Dr Vina Mazumdar has a similar assessment with regard to the experience of the Nari Vikas Sangha of West Bengal and other women's mass organisations. Women representatives in localities she observes, tend to have an innate sense of responsibility and have demonstrated a strong awareness of issues such as communal violence and lawlessness, the harm done by chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and monoculture and the availability of water. They also have an earthy understanding of social issues – Punjabi village women, for instance, made a connection between alcoholism and the patriarchal upbringing of sons.

The demand for an OBC segment within the women's reservation is intended to obtain reservations for OBC men under threat of sabotaging the Bill. The constitutional provision for SC/STs will remain in place within

the women's quota, but proportional reservations for OBCs and minorities will carry separate ramifications. There is no estimate for OBCs, as the last caste census took place in 1931. The Mandal Commission recommendations were not about proportional estimates, since OBCs number well over 50 per cent of the total population. As for minorities, a number of the Mandal castes are Muslim in any case – communal reservations in legislatures will raise a hornet's nest.

Another debate will completely side-track the question. Gender discrimination occurs in all caste and communities, and is autonomous of other forms of discrimination. Issues concerning women as a group exist apart from matters of ethnic identity. These range from dowry murder, female infanticide and domestic violence, to education, laws governing migrant labour and informal sector work, the availability of child care, maternity benefits and the provision of toilet facilities in public places. Reservations are intended to correct historical injustices. The oppression of women is an historical injustice if ever there was one. The principle of the autonomy of gender-related issues and the human rights of women has to be brought home forcefully to those who control legislative institutions. Nothing prevents them from fielding OBC candidates for reserved seats. Aren't they confident of the loyalty of "their" women?

National institutions tend to be distant from issues which concern localities. Yet a more equitable representation of women in legislatures might complement the panchayat reservation and correct this alienation. The presence of a bloc of women in Parliament will make legislators more amenable to amending laws which make rape trials humiliating for victims, and more sensitive to issues which manifest the sub-human status of women. At the very least, it will reduce the number of goondas in legislatures and the expenditures incurred to guard persons from whom we need protection. In turn, the disabilities suffered by panchayats in terms of a lack of adequate powers might be overcome with greater administrative devolution, which will become easier with the presence of sympathetic MPs.

Why 33 per cent reservation? Questions about this "magical" figure have a snide ring. It is indeed arbitrary. But 33 per cent is a sight better than 5 per cent or 7 per cent, which is all that women may expect under the current dispensation. Indeed, 33 per cent will be a major victory in the struggle for social democracy. Citing the tendency of male bus passengers

to treat non-reserved seats as their preserve is frivolous – one does not remain in a bus for years, nor have the opportunity of arguing with one's interlocutors. And surely the possibility of a more equitable distribution of seats in buses would brighten if there were a larger number of women demanding it?

Patriarchal oppression will *not* end with reservation, nor is thoroughgoing gender justice possible under the capitalist system. Capitalism is a seemingly objective mode of control over human labour, which despite being muted by impersonal market forces perpetuates violence, chauvinism and patriarchy. Nonetheless, combatting patriarchy in each of its bastions is necessary in the ongoing struggle for social democracy. The women's movement in India is at the crossroads – the health of Indian democracy depends on its struggle for the Reservation Bill. A Lok Sabha elected on false promises is now seeking to extricate itself by procrastination. Prime Minister I.K. Gujral should not hesitate to go to the country on the most far-reaching constitutional development since 1950. It will stamp him with the mark of a statesman and redeem the egalitarian promise of Indian democracy.

An afterthought. Take a shave, Sharadji. How long will you keep hiding behind the fungus?

15
The Futility of Common Sense: An Essay on Ahimsa

Gandhi's Ahimsa was his way to resolve disputes and overcome differences in a manner consistent with human dignity

(Published in 1998, *A Collection of Essays*, SPIC MACAY)

Upon hearing that I was to be the advisor for a documentary film on non-violence, one of my respected erstwhile teachers remarked that it was "the richest irony". He had good cause to say so. In my student days I was convinced that the only way any real social and political change could be brought about was by means of revolutionary violence. I became an activist in this cause in 1970, and after the first phase of "extremism" as it was then called, came to an end, I set aside this question as of tangential importance, not deserving of philosophical or theoretical consideration. Years later, when I was severely physically assaulted in the context of a struggle against corruption in the college where I worked, I became aware of the intense significance of this question – for this realisation at least, I am beholden to my assailants.

The Ubiquity of Violence

The most striking feature of the murder of Rajiv Gandhi was not the suicide of a young woman, but the fact that a man calmly watched the entire event, in the knowledge that it was being recorded on camera. There are now young people all over the world, for whom the sight of human flesh and blood is an ordinary experience. As a teacher, I was horrified to learn that many students had witnessed people being burnt alive in the

Delhi carnage of 1984 and some had even participated in the violence. Should I have been surprised? Some members of the child murder-gangs of Colombia are not yet in their teens, and child-Mujahids were sent into battle by Iran in its war with Iraq. For Palestinian refugee children, destruction wrought by Israeli jets or warring militia are still part of everyday life, while the schoolchildren of Israel live in a perpetual climate of tension to which their government contributes as much as embittered Palestinians. Generations of black children in South Africa have known violence all their lives. Visual media have helped reduce to nil the distance that separates us from manifestations of human brutality. Violence has become part of everyday life.

Systemic violence is the lubricant of all oppressive social relations. Part of its baggage is the negation of reason, equality and respect for humanity. Violence directed at labourers and at women and children is the substratum of patriarchy and exploitation. In the months of April and May 1997, two cases of young women being murdered by their caste-panchayats have been reported from north India. Both were in their teens. They committed the "crime" of falling in love and making their own decisions about a life partner. The fact that both belonged to backward castes and that there is no hue and cry over the atrocities by the political representatives of the backward classes shows that those who portray themselves as politically progressive have scant commitment to individual liberty or the human rights of women. It would seem that instances of "domestic" violence are accepted as *normal*, when the victims are women. The social conscience of the articulate middle-classes is far more exercised over financial matters than the loss of human life or the humiliation of weak and helpless citizens.

Social relations upheld by violence are the basis of all state structures. The ubiquity of domestic violence and social degradation accustoms people to physical intimidation. This kind of "training" psychologically prepares people for violent experiences later in life, whether these arise out of paramilitary service or work in the informal sector. All over the world, armed bodies of men have trained themselves to kill for the sake of power and the subordination of others. It might seem ironic, but progressive developments such as the industrial revolution and the growth of democratic politics exacerbated this trend, with entire societies being mobilised for war. The first World War cost 20 million lives and the second

55 million. (Over 20 million in the latter figure were Russian). Today the advanced capitalist countries spend 500 billion dollars annually on the military of which a third is spent on arms purchases and development. There are about 100 million land mines scattered in 69 countries which kill or maim 500 persons every week, 26,000 every year, mostly civilians. (Manufacturing a mine costs a few dollars, de-activating one 200 to 1000 dollars). Vast resources are expended on war preparations – comparative estimates tell us that even a 20 per cent reduction in military budgets would bring 189 million children into school, the cost of one Seawolf nuclear submarine ($2.5 billion) would pay for an immunisation programme for all the world's children, and the cost of one Stealth bomber, for family planning services for 120 million women in the developing world. Despite a decline in arms trading since the end of the Cold War, arms merchants and military industries still exercise a powerful influence over governments. Social priorities in today's world can only be described as deranged.

Violence signals the end of conversation, blurs our sense of time, cause and effect and feeds upon itself. As an instrument of liberation, it has a tendency to become illusory, as the oppressed begin to speak the language of oppression. It produces a spiral of justifications for brutality, enabling its perpetrators to take on the guise of victims. In the minds of those who killed Sikh citizens in 1984, their targets were not "innocent", rather, they shared the blame for the murder of Indira Gandhi and the violence indulged in by Bhindranwale. For their part, the Punjab terrorists had convinced themselves that they were only responding to the victimisation of their community by the Indian state. Violence also has the unique quality of legitimising itself retro-actively. Terror in the Punjab in the late 1980s seemed to justify terror in the nation's capital in 1984. (Till this day the Lok Sabha has not seen it fit to pass a resolution of condolence for the thousands of persons killed in those bloodstained 72 hours). Similarly, the hatred directed at Indian Muslims by a certain political tendency has tended to produce a post-facto justification for the two-nation theory of Jinnah upon which the Partition was based. In turn, that hatred appeared to those possessed by it as a consequence of the "separatism" of Muslims in general and retribution for the pain and trauma suffered by Hindu and Sikh refugees in 1947. Who is to blame? This is a question fraught with ambivalence. But for those who have succumbed to communal ideology, it

is indeed a very simple question, and the easy answer is always – *They*.

Let us consider the prevalence of the idea of victimhood. An examination of instances of mass animosity will reveal that the sense of being victimised is central to an explanation of violence. The Nazis invented the Final Solution (ie. mass extermination) in order to deal with a so-called Jewish conspiracy, which they claimed had victimised the German people. Of course, the question of social oppression is a highly charged political issue. Thus, although it is generally accepted that the so-called low castes were the victims of the Brahmanical social order, upper-caste Indian society feels *itself* victimised by them for having obtained affirmative action in state policy. "These SC-STs are the most privileged people in India", is a sentiment often heard in private conversations – it becomes public on occasions like the anti-Mandal agitation of 1990. Relations between Hindus and Muslims are even more complex, because of the deep-rooted conviction in Hindu society that the advent of Islam in India was accompanied by widespread manifestations of intolerance towards non-Muslims. Such perceptions are based partly on facts, but they also involve simplifications and tend to leave out memories and instances of their opposite. Howsoever we choose to look at it, the fact remains that this is a common perception. For their part, elite Muslims experienced the growth of a popular national movement as the gradual development not of democracy but of a Hindu majoritarian polity which would swamp them in due course. Each community felt itself victimized by the other and leaders marshalled arguments to prove their point. Here then, is a case of the circular logic that overtakes the dialogue of antagonistic communities.

Those of us concerned with social change must think seriously about the patriarchal and reactionary nature of violence. Why, for instance, did the militant patriot Bhagat Singh in his last days write that non-violence was a must for mass movements? Perhaps he understood instinctively that the politics of terror could only be practised (in the main) by organisations of young men, whereas democratic movements required the participation of millions of people, including women, children and the elderly, most of whom would not want to die for high ideals but live in the hope of a better future. However, non-violence is not merely a matter of tactics. Rather, it is connected to fundamental issues of the nature of power and the kind of liberation we may seek.

With God on Our Side...

Even more than the matter of physical harm, violence manifests the desire to humiliate the opponent and subjugate his or her dignity. This emotion has deadly and debilitating effects. Society will always pay a price for the humiliation of any of its constituents – even if these effects take centuries to work themselves out. The relations between Armenians and Turks, African-Americans and White Americans, Black and White in South Africa, the Irish and the English, carry with them a legacy of bitterness rooted in a centuries-long history.

However, no society can be held together solely by means of force, if only because of the complete social disruption that would entail. Even the powerful require some peace in order to enjoy their power. Because of this, the products of the intellect, such as Reason, Philosophy, Religion and Art, have had a tendency to be harnessed to the needs of the State. Moreover, acts of violence always seem to need ethical justification, as if in implicit acceptance of their status as *wrong-doing*. Hence the persistent relation of violence to ethical issues and the development of structures of organised violence into ideological systems specialising in the alteration of moral sensibilities to produce versions of the "just war", or *Dharmayuddha*.

To take one example from history of the spiralling effects of violence, I will draw the reader's attention to events that took place nine centuries ago. I refer to the Crusades undertaken by medieval Christianity to "liberate" Jerusalem from the suzerainty of the Seljuks, a Turkish dynasty which conquered Palestine in the middle of the eleventh century. Historical evidence suggests that the project was part of a Papal scheme to subjugate Byzantium (Byzantine was the ancient name for Constantinople, which later became Istanbul and was the centre of the flourishing Eastern Orthodox Church). Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade (1096-99 AD). His slogan "God Wills It", was a means of uniting western princes and overcoming any priestly aversion to violence. Armed with ethical authority, the crusaders convinced themselves of the need to exterminate the Turks. Their blood-lust was displayed in the five-week long siege and capture of Jerusalem, when, maddened by victory after years of travail they rushed into houses and mosques, killing men, women and children alike on July 15, 1099. The Jews were held to have assisted the Muslims and were burnt alive in their synagogue. Western sources put the number of Arabs killed

at 10,000, Arab ones at 100,000. After this, Arabs began referring to the westerners (Franks) as "Christian dogs". Here is what a historian has to say:

> The massacre at Jerusalem profoundly impressed all the world... (and) emptied Jerusalem of its Moslem and Jewish inhabitants. Many even of the Christians were horrified by what had been done; and amongst the Moslems, who had been ready hitherto to accept the Franks... there was henceforward a clear determination that (they) must be driven out. It was this bloodthirsty proof of Christian fanaticism that re-created the fanaticism of Islam. When, later, wiser Latins in the East sought to find some basis on which Christian and Moslem could work together, the memory of the massacre stood always in their way.

During the Third Crusade (1191), King Richard the Lion-Hearted ordered thousands of prisoners slaughtered and their corpses burnt to search for hidden gold. "Horrified at this atrocity, the Islamic world became ineradicably suspicious of the West". The contemporary Arab poet Mosaffer Allah Werdis composed these pain-stricken lines:

> We have mingled our blood and our tears
> None of us remains who has strength enough to beat off these oppressors
> The sight of our weapons only brings sorrow to us
> who must weep while the swords of war spark off the all-consuming flames...
> Oh that so much blood had to flow, that so many women were left with nothing but their bare hands to protect their modesty!
> Amid the fearful clashing swords and lances, the faces of the children grow white with horror.

In contrast to the sword-blessing popes of medieval Catholicism, the Eastern Church believed that faith ought only to be propagated by spiritual means. Although Turkish pressure had pushed Byzantine Christianity towards compromise with the Latins, the behaviour of the crusading armies *en route* to Palestine created a gulf between the two traditions. The turning point was marked by the vandalism let loose in Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade by men whose fathers had promised to defend it from the Turks. From this time onwards, Byzantine Christians

referred to the crusaders as "Frankish barbarians". Incidentally, the Persian word *firingi*, meaning "French, Italian or European", originated in the colloquial Arabic word *franj*, which carried a connotation of barbarism from the time of the crusades. Given the experiences described above this is not surprising. Thus, our own Hindustani term *firangi* was coloured from the start by a hateful usage steeped in the violence of the massacres of Jerusalem.

I leave it to the reader to consider whether mythic memories of these events might have any bearing on contemporary relations between Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and the West, and Muslims and Christians in a part of the world that still transmits its violent tension all over the Middle East and beyond.

However, there also existed a more down-to-earth attitude among the Christian public, who began to support pacifist movements in the aftermath of the crusades. This attitude was expressed in the writings of (for example), the French poet Rutebeuf, who had some very sensible things to say about the holy war and holy places:

> Am I to leave my wife and children, all my goods and inheritance, to go and conquer a foreign land which will give me nothing in return? I can worship God just as much in Paris as in Jerusalem. One doesn't have to cross the sea to get to Paradise. Those rich lords and prelates who have grabbed… all the treasures on earth may well need to go on Crusade. But I live in peace with my neighbours… I am not bored with them yet and so I have no desire to go looking for a war… as long as (the Sultan) leaves me alone, I shall not bother my head about him. All you people… who go on pilgrimage to the Promised Land, ought to become very holy there: so how does it happen that the ones who come back are mostly bandits?… God is everywhere: to you He may only be in Jerusalem, but to me He is here in France as well.

Why do lines penned by a Frenchman seven centuries ago strike a chord in contemporary India? Is it because just four and a half years ago lakhs of Indians were sufficiently motivated by revengeful fervour to destroy a mosque? And that this act was seen by them as justifiable retaliation for acts of destruction which had taken place in mid-16th century? Is it because a town called Ayodhya has been emptied of its Muslim inhabitants? A bystander in the long corridors of time might well

wonder about how the thirst for revenge is never quenched, and how generations of victims stagger through the centuries victimising one another...

Gandhi's Truth

It is impossible to address the theme of non-violence without taking into account the attitude of its greatest practitioner. As a young man I treated Gandhi's pacifism with contempt – young men in particular are prone to associating violence with masculinity and non-violence with weakness. The thought that *ahimsa* could actually represent courage was alien to me. Our movement treated the Gandhian tradition as an obstacle to revolution and his leadership of the national movement as a gigantic failure. Apart from the personal experience of violence that I mentioned at the start of this essay, it was the failures of the revolutionary movement and the growth of communal hatred that gradually brought home to me the continuing relevance of Gandhi's life and the manner in which he left it. I remember being upset by an essay on Gandhi by a leftist Hindi litterateur who ended his diatribe with fulsome praise for Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse. This awakened me to the disconcerting potential similarities which attend doctrines of violent political change. The main currents of leftism in India have still not come to terms with Gandhi, (a lacuna which is parallel to their failure to theorise the question of violence), but the rapid growth of communalism in the past fifteen years has alerted them to his commitment and sacrifices for the cause of communal harmony. This realisation culminated in a demonstration in Delhi on Gandhi's death anniversary in January 1993.

Gandhi's ideas are sometimes misconstrued because of his refusal to countenance the separation of religion from politics. It is easier to understand this matter if we simply substitute the word "ethics" for "religion", and "power" for "politics". Does any of us seriously believe that the exercise of power ought to be devoid of moral considerations? Gandhi saw himself as a *karmayogi*, and regarded selfless worldly action directed towards the attainment of self-knowledge and collective salvation as his spiritual duty. He saw political activity as the supreme sphere of social action, but he insisted on imbuing this action with ethical imperatives such as *ahimsa* and the abolition of untouchability. In search

not of personal power but sovereignty for the Indian people, he exercised tremendous moral influence emanating from his renunciation of selfish goals – the hallmark of the traditional Hindu *tyagi*. Truth for him was the catch-all for the supreme goals of spirituality, including *moksha* and self-knowledge, as well as values such as justice and integrity. Non-violence was implicit in his Truth: "Truth is its own proof, and non-violence is its supreme fruit". His motives were at once spiritual and political – he did away with the separateness of their definitions, as he overcame the distinction between means and ends. Religion was not an instrument to be used tactically for the pursuit of political power, rather, political activity had to be virtuous and transparent in order to attain sound goals.

For all of Gandhi's apparent conservatism, it is clear that he subjected both tradition and contemporary spiritual authority to the test of his own conscience. Even if it were true that Tulsidas used to beat his wife, he remarks, "the *Ramayan* was not composed in order to justify men beating their wives". And despite the scenes of carnage described in the *Mahabharata*, Gandhi insists that Vyasa wrote his epic "to depict the futility of war", that the struggle described in it was a metaphor for the inner struggle between good and evil encountered by all human beings. If the purest form of action was devoid of desire for reward, then violence and untruthfulness were taboo, for selfishness was implied in them. Language and meaning changed and expanded over the centuries, argued Gandhi, and "it is the very beauty of a good poem that it is greater than its author". Despite the warlike metaphors of the *Gita*, he insisted that "after forty years unremitting endeavour to enforce the teaching of the Gita in my own life, I have in all humility felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of *ahimsa* in every shape and form". Gandhi's conscience impelled him towards human equality and the peaceful resolution of political and social conflict. He rejected the violence inherent in caste-oppression and the potential justifications for violence contained in various religious texts and traditions. It is a mark of his theological creativity that he managed to speak in a conservative voice whilst advocating a radical break from existent traditional practices.

It is even more remarkable that among the people most affected by Gandhi's message were two of the most militant communities in India – the Sikhs and the Pathans. Few might remember today that the Akali party originated in a successful non-violent movement for the liberation of

gurudwaras from corrupt pro-British *mahants*. The Guru-ka-Bagh agitation in 1922 involved the peaceful violation of a ban on woodcutting for religious purposes by Akali *jathas*, whose members (many of whom were ex-soldiers who had fought for the British Empire in the first World War) were mercilessly beaten with metal-capped *lathis* by English police officers and their Indian underlings. Some 1500 were injured and 5000 imprisoned in a campaign which shook the country. Gandhi's associate C.F. Andrews witnessed this "ultimate moral contest". The sight of the brutalities, he reported, was "incredible to an Englishman". "Each blow (was) turned into a triumph by the spirit with which it was endured". Similarly, the activity of the red-shirted Khudai Khidmatgar (Servants of God) movement in the North West Frontier Province manifested one of the most staunchly Gandhian campaigns for national independence and social upliftment in pre-1947 India. Their leader, Abdul Ghaffar Khan came to be known as the Frontier Gandhi, and preached a version of Islam which emphasised peace, forbearance and self-restraint. The Khidmatgars were in the forefront of the civil disobedience campaign in 1931 when they seized control of Peshawar and even ran a parallel administration for a few days after a regiment of the Garhwal Rifles (all Hindus) refused to open fire on Pathan *satyagrahis*. A Turkish scholar who visited the Frontier in the 1930s suggested that the Pathans had developed a new interpretation of force. In her words, "non-violence is the only form of force which can have a lasting effect on the life of society... And this, coming from strong and fearless men, is worthy of study".

Gandhi's understanding of violence sprang from his spiritual convictions. The fact that in the *Mahabharata* the wrong-doers had good men like Bhishma and Drona on their side was for him a sign that, "evil cannot by itself flourish in this world. It can do so only if it is allied with some good". He wrote this in 1926 and remained consistent in his belief. In 1940, he said, "Goondas do not drop from the sky, nor do they spring from the earth like evil spirits. They are the product of social disorganisation, and society is therefore responsible for their existence... they should be looked upon as a symbol of corruption in our body-politic". Confronted by riots in 1946 he said, "I deprecate the habit of procuring a moral alibi for ourselves by blaming it all on the goondas. We always put the blame on goondas. But it is we who are responsible for their creation as well as encouragement". And at the height of the violence of 1947 he said, "it is

time for peace-loving citizens to assert themselves and isolate goondaism. Non-violent non-cooperation is the universal remedy. Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living in and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives it is withdrawn".

These insights were the products of his interventions in places which had witnessed some of the worst instances of communal violence in pre-independence India – the villages of Noakhali and the city of Calcutta. For contemporary observers, it was nothing short of a miracle that Hindus and Muslims in their thousands attended Gandhi's prayer meetings and even celebrated *Eid* together in August 1947. Viceroy Mountbatten sent him this telegram: "My dear Gandhiji, In the Punjab we have 55 thousand soldiers and large-scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal our forces consist of one man, and there is no rioting... As a serving officer may I be allowed to pay my tribute to the One Man Boundary Force...". The Muslim League party in the Constituent Assembly in Delhi passed a resolution expressing its "deep sense of appreciation of the services rendered by Mr Gandhi to the cause of restoration of peace and goodwill between the communities in Calcutta". Less than a month later, Gandhi went on fast against a renewed outbreak of violence and the city witnessed the unprecedented scene of the European-commanded police force observing a 24 hour fast in sympathy with Gandhi and blood-crazed goondas surrendering their weapons to him. The staunchly anti-Congress English editor of *The Statesman* made a point of announcing that henceforth "Mr Gandhi" would be referred to in his columns as *Mahatma*. If we were to use Gandhi's logic to describe the situation he confronted in 1947, we could say that the struggle between violence and *ahimsa* was going on in every soul, and was not merely demarcated by the social distance between goondas and polite society.

Gandhi was not the hopeless idealist that many consider him to be. He recognised that complete non-violence implied total cessation of all activity, and that this was incompatible with the need for it to be practised by the common people. He also made a distinction between the violence of the oppressors and that of the oppressed – defensive violence, in his view, was morally superior to the offensive variety. Violence, in Gandhi's definition, lay in causing "suffering to others out of selfishness, or just for the sake of doing so". He distinguished between self-interest and selfishness – the former meant securing those conditions necessary for leading a human and dignified life, the latter, putting oneself above others and pursuing

one's interests at their expense. Violent ideas were dangerous, since they created conditions for their realisation. Humiliating others was also a form of violence. Gandhi recognised that the state was an institutionalised and concentrated form of violence, and was convinced that this was due in great part to the need for maintaining an unjust and exploitative social system. In extreme situations he argued, violence was preferable to cowardice – he was against using *ahimsa* as a means of rationalising passivity in the face of grave injustice and wrongdoing. He favoured physical resistance by victims of rape if there was no possibility of resisting non-violently.

Ultimately however, as the scholar Bhikhu Parekh puts it, Gandhi was convinced that of "the reign of violence could not be overthrown by adding to it". Great danger lay in deriving common-place justifications for violence, such as the violation of nature in the name of human self-interest, the need to maintain the coercive apparatus of the state, revolutionary violence practised in the name of resistance to oppression. He was (again, in Parekh's words), "deeply worried about the way in which the limited legitimacy of violence in human life was so easily turned into its general justification", making it the rule rather than the exception. Once this happened, "men kept taking advantage of the exceptions and made no effort to find alternatives". This, for Gandhi, was the main reason for stressing the need for social and political activists to *train* themselves in the ideal of *ahimsa*, which in his definition was not merely the absence of violence but included the positive value of *karuna*, or compassion. By elevating *ahimsa* to the level of a moral ideal, he hoped to minimise the violence which was inevitable in the process of social and political transformation. Even if it could never be fully realised, *ahimsa* functioned as a kind of utopia, without which human society would have no standards of perfection towards which to strive and against which we might judge our actions.

Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom

In the contemporary world, there is no statesman with as high a stature as Nelson Mandela, and no real-life story so dramatic as his role in the dismantling of apartheid. This is manifest in the outpouring of genuine affection which he evokes among people everywhere and of all races and communities. There is no doubt that without him the struggle against the

racist system and the dangerous circumstances arising out of its eventual collapse would have been accompanied with far greater disruption and violence than actually took place. In this sense, Mandela has contributed to a (relatively) non-violent resolution of a potentially explosive situation. So, his views on this matter are of no small significance.

In his acclaimed memoir, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela repeatedly says that for him, non-violence was an issue subject to pragmatic rather than ethical principles. "For me, non-violence was not a moral principle but a strategy; there is no moral goodness in using an ineffective weapon". His positions arose out of his compulsions, but at the level of ideas, they may be characterised as utilitarian – and usefulness as a standard of goodness is no standard at all. Mandela also made a contrast between the White supremacist state which permitted no political freedom whatsoever to the African population, and the British Raj, which he saw as a system which did not confront peaceful protest with violence. Here he is mistaken, because from Jallianwala Bagh to the Civil Disobedience campaigns of the early 1930s, instances abound of the British rulers of India doing precisely that. Nevertheless, it could be argued that aspects of the apartheid regime such as segregation and the attempted ghettoisation of the entire Black population were certainly worse than the Indian polity under British imperialism.

However, this is not the place for a comparative discussion about the British Empire and South Africa under apartheid. What I am concerned with is Mandela's manner of dealing with the means used to fight against an unjust system. Despite his stated belief in a tactical rather than ethical approach to this question, Mandela's passionate belief in the need to avoid a racial civil war in South Africa and his focus as commander of the MK (the military wing of the African National Congress), on the sabotage of installations rather than on terror directed at human beings indicate his deep-rooted ambivalence with regard to the use of violence. He recounts an incident in his memoir about an occasion when he shot a sparrow with an air-rifle at a hide-out in the countryside. The five-year-old son of the houseowner looked at the dead bird with tears in his eyes and asked why he had killed the bird, adding, "its mother will be sad". Mandela remembers his sensations at hearing this – "My mood immediately shifted from one of pride to shame; I felt that this small boy had far more humanity than I did. It was an odd sensation for a man who was the leader of a

nascent guerilla army". Only a politician with deeply pacific instincts (and mind you, he was quite clear that he was *not* a pacifist) would derive a philosophical lesson from the shooting of a sparrow.

Mandela's memoir is full of such ambivalences – but they enhance rather than diminish his stature. Why is this so? It is because like Gandhi, his life activity speaks more than his words and theories. He rose to become chief executive of the state he fought all his life, but would it not be grossly unjust to him to say that he devoted himself to the pursuit of power? His complete lack of rancour towards those who ran a vicious police state, kept him in prison for nearly three decades and disallowed him even from attending the funeral of his mother, show him up to be a man whose dignity would always remain unimpaired. To my mind, it is this quality that enabled him to transcend the impulse to retribution, which is one of the roots of violence. He did not need to humiliate his opponents in order to achieve his ends. This is why, after all is said and done, the struggle against apartheid did not succeed on account of revolutionary violence and terrorism but the political and ethical collapse of its institutions in the face of universal antipathy and opposition.

Today, the struggle to overcome the bitter legacy of racism is being carried out in the same spirit. Mandela's government has instituted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a unique body with statutory authority to grant amnesty to perpetrators of gross human rights violations who confess their misdeeds. Great problems have and will inevitably affect its work – not least of which is the sense of alienation which attends any interposition of the administration between perpetrators and victims of violence. Nevertheless, the Commissions' work is an unprecedented effort to heal wounds on the basis of human reconciliation. I am reminded of a statement which occurs in a controversial Russian film critical of Stalinism (entitled *Repentance*) made in the Gorbachev era – where the protagonist makes a distinction between a mistake, a crime and a sin. Mistakes may be rectified, he says, and crimes punished, but there is only one antidote for a sin, and that is repentance.

That this is a feasible and (compared to revenge and retribution) potentially a satisfactory procedure for coping with ethnic bitterness is shown by an incident which took place in Gujarat in January 1994. A news report described tens of thousands of citizens of Sidhpur, Mehsana, (affected by riots in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition), taking

a public pledge of peace, with killers acknowledging their guilt and the families of the victims declaring their forgiveness. The remarkable maturity displayed by the citizens of Sidhpur is an object-lesson for people all over the world caught in a similar predicament. Justice and social order are a matter of balance – between means applied and ends obtained, the need for punishment and the need for reform, the conscience of the individual and the interests of society. These, sometimes conflictual elements can only be reconciled on the plane of a social ethic, although the kind of ethic invoked and the nature of the reconciliation effected will differ in each polity. And it is the ethical terrain upon which Palestinians and the Nationalist Irish, to take only two prominent examples of populations currently involved in violent conflict, may obtain their desired ends, if only they have the courage to reconcile ends and means on the pattern of *ahimsa*.

As You Sow...

What is the truth of the matter? In an age whose common sense has it that everything is exchangeable with money, where images are valued more than the things they represent, religious and cultural values appropriated and used as instruments for the pursuit of power, the concept of truth seems to have become redundant. For example, cigarette advertisements portray smokers having a good time, in the pink of health, whereas the truth of the matter is that smoking tobacco causes cancer and heart disease. To take another example, in May 1992 national television telecast an adulatory portrayal of V.D. Savarkar, the militant Hindu nationalist, without mentioning that he was an accused and main conspirator in the murder of Mahatma Gandhi. We may also note the linguistic transformation of Babri Masjid from a mosque into a "disputed structure". At the best of times, advertisements (and propaganda) convey a mixture of fact and fiction, communication and misinformation. Where is the concern for truth in all this? What matters is whether the image is credible or incredible, not whether it is true. Nonetheless, society cannot dispense with the concept of truth. Physical laws are not subject to political manipulation, even if they may be put to nefarious uses, and in the social realm, brute facts such as oppression and exploitation have a habit of surfacing after decades. Popular democratic aspirations and transparent

institutions are another guarantor of the social value of the concept of Truth.

Truth is a term which admits of many meanings. At the very least, it can mean Reality as well as Ideality. In any case, it implies a search, an ideal and a standard. It may never be attained as a whole, but can still be worth striving for. However, for a certain cast of mind truth does not imply a search, but a revelation. If one Revealed Truth does not set itself against others like itself, no conflict arises. But if in real life, its followers cannot bear to co-exist with followers of other beliefs, they are already in the process of arming themselves, converting their belief into the *Absolute* Truth. And it is in the very nature of absolutism that it reacts violently to difference.

Enlarging on Gandhi's arguments against violence, Parekh observes that "irreversible deeds require infallible knowledge to justify them". I would add that those possessed of infallible knowledge will sooner or later take recourse to irreversible deeds. If we think about this carefully, we might understand why political tendencies (whether of Right or Left-wing persuasion) with an overt or covert belief in the efficacy of violent methods are generally constructed around authoritarian principles. This is why Gandhi always spoke of *experiments* with truth, and insisted that the search be conducted upon the basis of an explicit commitment to non-violence. Appearing before the Disorders Inquiry Committee at Ahmedabad in the wake of the agitations of 1919, Gandhi was asked by Lord Hunter to consider the position of the Governors, who were obliged to uphold the law and punish those whose stated object was to violate it. Gandhi replied that non-violent *satyagrahis* protesting unjust laws were "the best constitutionalists". Hunter told him that opinions might differ as to the justice or injustice of laws, to which Gandhi replied that this was the reason he insisted on non-violence – a *satyagrahi*, he said, gives the right of independent judgement to his opponent. Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, another member of the Committee, sought to trap Gandhi on his stated objective of the pursuit of truth: "However honestly a man may strive in his search for truth, his notions of truth may be different from the notions of others. Who then is to determine the truth?". Once more Gandhi made his point by insisting that it was precisely because there were differing versions of the truth that "the non-violence part was a necessary corollary" to his struggle.

Here, in my opinion, is a profound yet simple contribution to one of the most turbulent philosophical debates of our age – fascinated as it is by plural identities, the many-sidedness of meaning and the rejection of universals. Gandhi was not a speculative philosopher, but his position offers a way out of the conundrum created by contemporary (post-modern) relativism, viz, the fate of standards of judgment once we accept the many-sidedness of meaning. Gandhi accepts this multiplicity, but insists that there *is* an ethical standard by which all relative "truths" may be judged – their contribution to the attainment of *ahimsa*. In this sense he was a profound egalitarian humanist – he refused to use cultural, religious and political differences among people to stereotype them as less than human, as worthy of discrimination, injustice and violence. This did not mean that he suspended his rational intellect or refrained from making his own assessment of religious practices, cultures and systems of thought. He kept his own counsel, made his own judgements, and remained a practising Hindu till the moment of his death. But it is difficult to fault him for demeaning or ridiculing the beliefs of others. All he asked was that a way be found for resolving disputes, pursuing arguments, overcoming (or indeed, living with) difference in a manner consistent with human dignity.

When we stop to consider the scale of destruction that society has unleashed upon itself and still prepares for, the need for a non-violent culture stares us in the face. According to one estimate, our century has seen some 250 wars and nearly 110 million deaths related to war and ethnic conflict. Over the decades an increasing proportion of these losses have taken place among civilians. The explosive energy yield of the current (reduced) global nuclear weapons stockpile is 8000 megatons (the equivalent of 8000 million tons of TNT). This is *727 times* the total yield of all the explosives used in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War put together. Between 1960-94, the developing countries spent 775 billion dollars on arms purchases, which made up 69 per cent of the total world arms trade. In 1995 there were 22.4 million men and women in uniform – 65 per cent of whom belonged to the developing world, whose populations are paying the price for the distorted social perspectives of their rulers. By any sane standard, it would appear that the human race is hypnotised by the death wish.

Ultimately *ahimsa* is another name for restraint. Gandhi's devotion to it has had a significant effect on our society, even though it remains true

that democracy in India still has a long way to go. It is fashionable these days to bewail the fate of the Indian republic and to ascribe all its ills to its founders. It is worth considering that factors such as the pressure of Great Power interests, the consequences of rampaging global capitalism and the selfishness of our ruling elite may well be the factors more responsible for our problems. We should remember that India has not yet succumbed to the authoritarian vision of communal politics, nor to the jackboots of military rule. One reason for this lies in the impact of a mass democratic movement for national liberation which despite all its weaknesses, did achieve sovereignty on the basis of a non-violent political programme. Of the several thousand daily visitors to Gandhi Smriti in Delhi (the place of his assassination), a large number are village folk who treat the memory of the Mahatma with great reverence. The elite may have reduced him to an icon and the urban middle-class might treat him with ignorance and disdain, but it would seem that humbler Indians have not yet forgotten the man. He touched a chord which I believe has acquired a permanent place in the conversation of humanity. Restraint and compassion are qualities which will always be necessary for human society to survive. If we aspire to a more humane, less brutal and more civilised state of existence, the spirit and optimism required to attain it will in no small part have been generated by the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his message of *ahimsa*.

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MARCH 11, 2000, THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

The Mirror of History

The historian has to be an iconoclast or risk becoming a propagandist

> "The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence"
> – Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*

The history of India over the past century unfolds like a chronicle of civil war. India was partitioned, the segment re-partitioned. "Internal enemies" were identified and massacres unleashed. No solutions were found. Today, communal myths possess nuclear bombs. There are lines of control everywhere – in villages, cities and in hearts. Barbed wire, iron gates and security guards abound. Flagpoles of religious places compete with each other for height. Society is awash with fear. Thanks to the guardians of "identity", outraged sentiment seems to be on the rampage – battling over cricket pitches, books, films and paintings.

Humanity possesses a natural tendency for remembrance and its transmission. For those interested in ideals of progress, history is a laboratory of social theory. It is also the terrain of Identity, a category that sits uneasily with human equality, and has taken millions of lives. History as the maidservant of a cause undermines its own disciplinary procedures. No history is free of tendency, and historians' convictions undoubtedly affect their output. However, just as the Euclidian point is essential to geometry, the search for truth has to remain an ideal, even if

an unattainable one, for history.

This is a painful commitment, because historical materials defy dogma. None of us like our beliefs being challenged. Gandhians do not want to be reminded of the repercussions of the Khilafat movement or the Congress' attitude to the 1946 naval mutiny. Communists are defensive about the stance of the CPI in 1942 and the Adhikari Resolution supporting Partition. Admirers of Savarkar do not advertise the fact that he assisted the British war effort, was not averse to Mahasabha participation in the Muslim League ministry of NWFP in 1943, and was a main accused in the Gandhi murder trial. The Pakistan Ideology Act restrains Pakistani historians from questioning the two-nation theory or writing a non-tendentious account of Jinnah's career. The RSS might not like to be reminded that in May 1947 the Akhil Rajya Hindu Sabha under J&K RSS chief Prem Nath Dogra, passed a resolution on Kashmir stating that "a Hindu state should not join secular India". Or that Sardar Patel accused RSS men of celebrating Gandhi's assassination. Trotskyists don't dwell on Bolshevik military action against the Kronstadt sailors in 1921, Stalinists don't remember state terror and mock trials in the USSR. Nazi apologists don't recall the Holocaust and Zionists suffer amnesia about the terror unleashed by the Haganah and Stern gangs in 1948. Japanese historians are defensive about the massacres in Nanking and Shanghai and someday Chinese historians will forget that China waged war on Vietnam in 1979 in tandem with the USA.

For some ideologues, the past is a saga of victory and defeat. The fear of ambivalence is characteristic of them and in their hands, history is pure polemic. Savarkar's speech to the Hindu Mahasabha in 1942 described 17th century India as being "a veritable Pakistan", with "Hindustan being wiped out", and the 18th century witnessing the march of Hinduism. This anachronism is repeated in a Pakistani textbook of 1982, which teaches that in the 16th century, "`Hindustan' disappeared and was absorbed in 'Pakistan'". The distortions extend to contemporary analysis. *Time* summed up the history of the 20th century as a victory of "free minds and free markets over fascism and communism" (December 31, 1999). Along with Clinton's essay it misrepresents the Allied victory in World War II as an American one, ignoring the role of the Red Army and the fact that the USSR lost over twenty million lives, compared to less than 3 lakh Americans. This is History as the paean of megalomania. I do not believe that all viewpoints are equally biased, or that history provides no lessons.

From the welter of partiality, we may glean truths and hope – but only if our profession is motivated by respect for human experience, and not just "Hindu" or "Muslim" experience. The historian has to be an iconoclast or risk becoming a propagandist.

In an attempted refutation of Bharat Bhushan's article, *The Other Italian Connection* (HT Feb 18), K.R. Malkani (Feb 23) states that the RSS was founded before leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, B.S. Moonje visited Italy, that its heroes were Indians, and that Gandhi also met Mussolini. Here is an example of history as polemic. It was the militaristic mind-set of fascism, not its specific heroes that inspired Moonje. All ultra-rightists had their own "national" heroes. Mussolini seized power in 1922, and his impact was evident by the time the RSS was founded in 1925. And whereas Moonje was greatly impressed by Mussolini, Gandhi told the latter that his state was "a house of cards", and took a dim view of the man – "his eyes are never still". Moonje's trip was not an innocuous replica of Gandhi's.

Defending the recent withdrawal of the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) volumes, government protagonists aver that the authors reduced Gandhi to a footnote. It is ironic that persons sympathetic to the politics of Gandhi's assassin repeatedly take refuge behind Gandhi's memory. Let us address the issue differently. Gandhi was a proponent of *ahimsa*. Hindutva's proponents believe that Hindus are too pacific – even cowardly, and need to become militant. Their heroes are those whom they identify as warriors. Their constant evocation of wounded sentiment as a justification for "direct action", prompts us to ask the government to clarify its position on violence. Should sentiment be elevated to a level superior to the needs of civic order and criminal justice? Is it surprising that a retired CBI director is so fond of the Bajrang Dal, an organisation known more for muscle than mind? That a former union minister encouraged the intimidation of a film unit? That the vandalisation of the BCCI office was condoned by a Chief Minister who saw no reason for a police case? Is it their case that Naxalite violence is wrong but violence unleashed by outraged sentiment is acceptable? Do they have the courage to say so explicitly?

The assault on the mind is the most dangerous feature of the current situation. Mushirul Hasan was attacked for suggesting that the ban on *Satanic Verses* be lifted. (A prominent Congressman incited that campaign). Leader of the progressive Dawoodi Bohra movement, Asghar

Ali Engineer is beaten up for questioning the Syedna's powers. Whatever happened to the rights of minorities *within* minorities? Demands are voiced – rather belatedly – for a ban on Dante's *Inferno*. Film screenings are disrupted. Literary commentaries on the *Granth Sahib* result in threats of excommunication. (How brave our militants are!). And when we need a discussion on the rule of law, we indulge instead in literary criticism, film appreciation etc. Surely the point ought to be whether bad authors and filmmakers have a right to remain alive, with their bones intact. Whether the government can ensure a peaceful resolution of conflicts or if musclemen may run amuck because they have high connections. Gandhi rendered Hindus *nirvirya* (unmanly) and *napunsak* (impotent), said Godse. I beg to differ. Gandhi had greater physical courage than most politicians in his time – and not many of today's luminaries would venture forth without protection after three attempts at assassination. His *ahimsa* was a name for restraint, without which no society may survive and no institutions gather strength. Let us stop flaunting our boringly delicate sentiments, and address the deliberate inculcation of revenge and hatred. Those who care about human survival can see their future in the mirror of history.

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The Twenty-First Century – the End of History or the Beginning of Transformation?

The preservation of democracy will ultimately require humanity to transcend the capitalist system. Or else the capitalist system will end up destroying democracy.

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War are events of great magnitude. Because we are living through them, many of us do not appreciate fully the significance of what has happened – but as the new century unfolds it will become clearer. For certain liberal intellectuals these events signify the end of history itself – that is, history interpreted as the realisation of the idea of progress. Thus, Hegel's celebration of the Prussian absolutist state is replicated in Fukuyama's understanding of liberal capitalism as the final point of arrival of historical evolution. This ideologically coloured concept of history carries the implication that the future can unfold only as an endless vista of capitalist accumulation, and that there is a logical and natural connection between capitalism and democracy. Such theories are linked to classical political-economic notions of capital as a 'natural' phenomenon, or an ahistoric 'factor of production'. The same presumptions underlie the view that capitalism is an economic system which mysteriously combines greed and profiteering with the fulfilment of human interests through what Adam Smith named "the hidden hand" of the market.

Contemporary history has also been a witness to the ideological rise of monetarist triumphalism, and neo-liberalism, the politically inspired

dismantlement of the gains of social-democracy, and an all-round crisis of vision that affects both left and right-wing political forces. It has heralded an era of identity politics and fragmentation, creating more and more barriers between ordinary people on the one hand, coupled with structural adjustments geared toward maximum freedom for MNCs and speculative capital, on the other. After 9/11, it has been engulfed in the first overt phase of an emergent world order, one of whose characteristics is a global assault on civil liberties and long-standing legal conventions on human rights in wartime. It is now a matter of intense debate whether this phase is the last gasp of American imperialism, or the first expression of a more global and esoteric empire, the Empire of Capital.

The idea that capitalism is a permanent arrangement is an assumption that we must challenge. But there is a problem here. Right-wing triumphalism may indeed be challenged when placed in historical perspective. However, radical theory cannot approach the gigantic historical events of the century gone by without performing a thoroughgoing critique of its own past. Is it capable of doing this? The traditions of the past weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living, said Karl Marx – and the movement for social transformation is certainly living through a nightmare. To what extent is it of our own making? I will approach the issue by looking for theoretical lessons in historical events. The constraints of space and the limitations of my understanding will permit only a partial exploration.

Theoretical questions

The dynamic nature of social reality implies the need for theoretical dynamism. Without this, the radical sensibility becomes fragmented and ultimately loses itself in the dominant discourse of capitalism, nationalism and identity. This is what is happening now. Unfortunately, this trend is buttressed by the habit of denigrating theoretical effort to a level inferior to so-called 'activism'. I state below some issues which require reflection.

Nationalist ideology and capitalist media have perverted the concept of truth. In the first case God, or Truth is always with Us or the Nation, in the second case, truth is abolished and substituted by credibility. Thus, advertising (political or commercial) is barely distinguishable from propaganda – the truth-content of a message is of less importance than

whether it is credible or incredible. The concept of 'image' dominates modern political vocabulary, despite the obvious distinction between 'image' and 'reality'. Has this degeneration of political language affected the theory and practice of the Left?

The dogmatic nature of social theory and pedagogy in India has reduced both the critical intellect and the education system to a moribund condition. I suggest that the Leninist concept of "the outside" and the Stalinist convention that "the party is always right" imply an absolutist epistemology and an authoritarian notion of truth. In addition, they are associated with the epistemology of revelation *(ilhaam)*. Such approaches to knowledge are shared by institutions as far apart as the Vatican (with its notion of papal infallibility), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the various Leninist groups and parties. An important reason for the fractious nature of the Indian Left is its doctrinal attitude to knowledge.

There exists today a theoretical vacuum in the ranks of the "progressive forces". Important questions such as the value of democracy, the nature of violence and nationalism are treated pragmatically, as 'tactical' matters rather than substantially, as aspects of social relations. Most dominant ideologies, from Left to Right, attach (at best) an unreflective, or (at worst) a positive value to violence and to the Nation. The word 'foreign' is too easily used as a term of abuse. Most political currents treat democracy as something to be used rather than preserved and developed.

The category of identity and the phenomenon of violence carry deeply ambivalent ramifications for the Left. They pose an intellectual and ethical challenge that has never been adequately addressed. An absolutist mentality finds ambivalence intolerable and even terrifying. Faced with historical complexity, it finds refuge in simplistic formulae, and black and white ideas about the social universe. Because of this mental escapism, the radical sensibility has become fragmented. It strives to retain a left-wing posture while in fact it is profoundly conservative. Such issues must be addressed with frankness.

We often say that religion must be separated from politics. But what of the relationship between ethics and power? Is it possible for political power to operate in a manner that has nothing to do with morality? A debate is needed on the false dichotomy between ethics and science (including the social science and the "science of revolution"). This debate will have a

fruitful impact on theories of economic reductionism and social motivation.

What impact have our political practices had upon the institution of citizenship and the concept of the individual? What are the links between these two ideas and what relation do they bear with the ideals of social democracy? Or with the politics of identity?

These are some core theoretical concerns that need to be addressed. Unfortunately, it has become a habit among radical activists and intellectuals to attribute base motives to, or treat with contempt those who criticise established doctrine. Their mode of debate is polemical – coloured by personal *ad hominem* remarks, and sarcasm. This practice is detrimental to a genuine exchange of ideas. It reinforces factionalism, causes useless distractions and is a waste of time. It also signifies complacency. Firm adherence to dogma may be psychologically comfortable, but it can only ensure permanent political marginalisation.

History and Paradox

Nothing underlines the need for theoretical rejuvenation so much as the appearance of historical paradoxes. Let us look at some of these:

Integration and Fragmentation: We are supposed to be living through a period of globalisation. Actually, the emergence of a world economy began a few centuries ago, although the process has moved through specific phases. Yet it is also accompanied by increasing geo-political, ethnic and social fragmentation. Antagonisms based on ethnic and cultural identity proliferate, whilst at the same time capitalist institutions and capitalist relations acquire uniformity and integration. Political formations specialising in the preservation of 'tradition' and 'national uniqueness' encourage the colonisation by MNCs of mineral and forest resources, the commercialisation of common lands. The Czechs do not want to live with the Slovaks, but both of them desire to be part of the European Union and NATO. India and Pakistan hate each other, but both are desperate for American approval.

These apparently divergent phenomena may be understood within a theory that combines the particular characteristics of culture with the universal tendencies of capitalism. Thus, every nationalism celebrates particularity, yet the nation-state remains the general form of political association, common to all continents. Every monetary currency possesses

validity within certain boundaries, yet money as such remains the universal language of capitalist commerce. Nationalist particularism performs the function of ideological control and discipline. Another way of presenting this problem is to conceptualise the lag between the interdependent character of the world economy and the fragmentary nature of its political constituents. This is manifested as the inadequacy of global regulatory structures to contemporary economic and political requirements. Given the inherently conflictual nature of capitalist production relations, this should not surprise us. Global economic life includes policies of world financial institutions that affect the lives of millions of people denied a say in the decision-making processes of these bodies. In a nutshell, not only is there no direct co-relation between capitalism and democracy, it appears that capitalism as a global system is structurally undemocratic. The preservation of democracy will ultimately require humanity to transcend the capitalist system. Or else the capitalist system will end up destroying democracy.

Democracy and Equality: Another problem relates to the tension between political equality and social inequality. The dominant common sense of our times often counterposes political liberty to social and economic freedom. What issues arise out of such a juxtaposition? Without the movement of the repressed and exploited sections of society, feudal particularisms and barriers of capitalist accumulation could never have been overthrown. At the same time, the destructive impact of the capitalist market on traditional livelihood had become apparent by the early decades of the industrial revolution in mid-nineteenth century. It is noteworthy that the institutions of political democracy were not handed down by the ruling elites, but were a product of class struggle. Adult suffrage, the right to combine, and the right to social security were gains of the labour movement. In brief, the movement for political democracy was potentially always a movement for social democracy as well. In this sense the modern democratic state system has its origins as much in the aspirations of workers as in the requirements of capital. That is why its internal contradictions are always latent, and come to the surface periodically, when the consensus breaks down.

I would now like to address the logical tensions inherent in the concept of democracy. Democracy is a political form embodying certain principles of association. When considered within the context of a specific

socio-economic system, the history of democracy raises the question – how compatible is capitalism with human equality? I believe there is an incompatibility between a political form based on the ideal of equality on the one hand, and an economic system grounded on the subjugation of labour, on the other. However, since capitalism came into the world flying the flag of equality of opportunity and opposition to caste / feudal status and hierarchy, and since capitalist wealth takes liquid (monetary) rather than fixed (landed) forms, it is easy to confuse capitalism with democracy as such. However, the exploited elements of society are bound to struggle for deepening political democracy, and realising its social-democratic potential. When citizenship and equality before the law become dangerous for the sustained growth of capitalism, the elite's commitment to democracy can and will be withdrawn. This is what is happening in India today.

The above argument provides us an occasion to reflect on another paradox. Three decades ago, a section of the Indian communist movement took the 'Naxalite' turn. At that time, it denounced the electoral process as a fraud on the people, and aimed at the overthrow of the constitutional order. The ruling elite took political refuge behind the Constitution and the rule of law. Today, significant sections of the radical Left and its well-wishers have emerged as staunch defenders of the democratic rights and liberties enshrined in the Constitution, while the Indian ruling elite has repeatedly shown its discomfort with constitutional rights and proprieties. The protagonists have switched positions. Those of us who desire social change must think of a coherent explanation for this 180-degree turn. The analysis must focus on the following questions:

1. which political currents and social forces want to undermine democracy;
2. which social groups most require the preservation of democracy;
3. whether democracy may be protected by arousing the conscience of the social-political elite or whether this object entails an explicit effort on the part of oppressed social groups; and finally,
4. whether the defence of democracy requires a commitment to basic democratic values

Democracy and Identity: The idea and practice of democracy is linked to the concept of identity. The "rule of the people" carries the implicit, logical presupposition that we know who "the people" are, even before

we speak of their right to "self-determination". Definitions of the 'self', the ideologically defined boundaries of "the people" are presupposed in the practice of democracy. This issue is related to the birth and development of the nation-state and the notion of sovereignty. Identity is an ideological construction and therefore, a matter of political power and class interest. For example, the slogan that the Kashmiris have a right to "self-determination" implies that the identity of Kashmiris is self-evident. The moment the issue of the identity of Ladakhis or Dogras is brought into the argument, the latent violence of unilateral definitions becomes evident. We also need to distinguish between various streams of identity – religion-based, ethnic and linguistic, etc. Thus, whereas communalism is one type of identity politics, all identity politics are not communalist in orientation. The question of communalism will be discussed further on.

The exploitation of labour has always been linked with certain coordinates of identity. This is true with regard to the African slaves of the American cotton plantations, Tamil tea garden workers in Sri Lanka, Irish builders of British railroads, and the thousands of Indian indentured labourers, mostly of the so-called 'Depressed Classes', who were sent all over the British Empire to work on plantations. Identity has played a crucial role in extra-economic oppression, serving to intensify the exploitative process. Historically, the communist movement in India underplayed the question of caste-oppression and looked upon it as an ideological rather than structural issue. This alienated it from the most significant social group with a vested interest in democracy, and is one of the basic reasons for its political marginalisation and theoretical stagnation. (This matter needs a separate discussion).

Mobilisation around identity can be a powerful magnet in politics, but it is a double-edged sword. If the vision behind any specific politics of identity is that of human liberation, its language will be an inclusive one, seeking allies on the ground of similar existential experience. Thus, social humiliation, which is characteristic of the life experience of Dalits, and which formed the basis for the emergence of a 'Depressed Classes' estate, has also been the experience of other groups. Opposition to systematic humiliation can become a basis for building bridges between all oppressed people, Dalit and non-Dalit alike. Furthermore, a radical social-democratic politics must try to understand the links between social oppression based on caste and race, and the capitalist system as a whole. Without

this, identity politics runs the risk of speaking an exclusive language and thereby losing its liberatory potential. Although a focus on identity is necessary for workers who have been socially humiliated, its future depends on the evolution of a democratic programme speaking a common language of human liberation.

We must address the nature of identity politics. It cannot be dismissed or wished away, and it contains a potential for human betterment. But it is vulnerable to the problems of definition, of generating authoritarian tendencies towards its own constituents (needless to say, this has happened in the communist movement as well), of reducing itself to a vacuous radicalism of little benefit to the oppressed in whose name it speaks. It is also subject to the never-ending logic of internal fragmentation, as more and more identities are generated within the confines of the community which is being constructed. We may also note that those who speak the language of "minority rights" often ignore the rights of minorities *within* the minorities, or individual rights.

In its exclusivist form, by attaching virtue and vice to entire communities, identity politics enables India's *savarna*-capitalist elite to erode the rights and status of the individual citizen and thereby to subvert Indian democracy. For example, when communal violence is condoned by the police and legal system, this implies that all of us do not enjoy equal protection under the law. Citizenship is also undermined by the class/caste biases of the elite, including the senior bureaucracy, who are duty-bound to uphold the Constitution rather than interpret it.

Identity politics also contains the risk of repressive political tendencies. The shifting and overlapping nature of Indian identities – regional, linguistic and caste-based, makes this complex and contentious. It is high time that we give it the attention that it deserves.

Some landmarks of modern history

I will now briefly recount selected aspects of twentieth century history that are relevant to my argument. This exploratory exercise is meant to place our immediate and local predicament within a larger context. The period from 1789 till the second decade of the 19th century marked a revolutionary change in human affairs, with the appearance of the ideals of democracy, the nation state and republicanism in the political sphere

and industrialism in the sphere of economic life. It is noteworthy that the establishment of capitalist society was not a smooth process, nor was that of democracy. Nor should the two be confused. The French revolution was succeeded by Napoleonic imperialism, itself a highly ambivalent historical process, which set off severe political and military convulsions all over central and eastern Europe, not least in Germany and Imperial Russia. The English industrial revolution was marked by state interventions to establish the so-called free market economy, the very gradual retreat of the landed aristocracy, and massive struggles by the working class for enfranchisement and the right to combine. It was the reformist trends in the English and German labour movement, combined with revolutionary and syndicalist groups in France and southern Europe, that produced the International Working Men's Association, otherwise known as the First International. For practical purposes, the latter came to an end after the failure of the Paris Commune of 1871. The memories of 1789, of "the people" in motion, and of barricades and urban uprisings hung like a shadow through the events of the nineteenth century, prompting Marx to begin his famous manifesto with the image of a spectre. Although the much spoken-of worker's revolution did not occur, the fact remains that it was the pressure of the emergent labour movement that led to the staggered appearance of universal franchise and democratic institutions.

The unification of Germany in the 1870s, its emergence as a great power in central Europe radically altered the balance of power. Along with this, the competitive scramble for empire in the last quarter of the nineteenth century laid the seeds for some of the most profound and disturbing developments in human history. Steam engines, coal, steel and telegraphy transformed the face of the earth and enabled Europe to colonise most of the globe. Powerful labour movements, some of them influenced by anarchism and syndicalism, spread ripples of class antagonism among the ruling classes, who were themselves divided by factional power struggles. The political tensions accompanying this process led to the conflagration of the Great War, or the First World War, which saw the massive deployment of modern industrial processes, state-controlled economies and the mobilisation of entire populations for the war effort. It also broke forever the unity of the socialist movement.

Between 1911 and 1918, five dynastic empires collapsed – the Manchu (China), the Hohenzollern (Germany), the Tsarist (Russia), the Hapsburg

(Austro-Hungary) and the Ottoman (Turkey). This was the historical equivalent of an earthquake of the highest magnitude. The events of those seven years contain the key to the geo-politics of the twentieth century. The re-description of international boundaries at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, and the establishment of international institutions such as the League of Nations and the International Labour Office, were some of the new developments originating in those years. By far their most significant outcome was the Bolshevik Revolution and the appearance of two competing visions of the new world order – the Wilsonian (after US President Woodrow Wilson) ideal of co-existing capitalist nation-states, versus the Leninist ideal of international socialist revolution.

The Russian Revolution: Bolshevism was the first major challenge to capitalism and imperialism. The debate about the historical experience and legacy of Bolshevism will continue for decades. In this essay I merely wish to present an outline of an alternative approach. Firstly, the events of 1917 were possible only by the confluence of a peasant revolution against landed property with a workers' revolution against capitalism – in a Marxist sense, this combined the beginning of the bourgeois era with its end. The "peasant question" thereby became a major problem for the regime.

Second, there took place not two Russian revolutions in 1917-18, but three – the third being the upsurge of oppressed nationalities. It is noteworthy that today, the members of the CIS, the successor states of the USSR, signify by their existence the most lasting legacy of 1917. As one insightful historian has remarked about the First World War, "(It) had been a war of nationalities throughout; and the Russian Revolution had acted as a solvent of imperialism for the benefit, not so much of Communism or even of socialism, as of nationality" (Elie Halevy, *The Era of Tyrannies: Essays on Socialism and War*,1967). Despite the ideological impact of Bolshevism, the 1920s witnessed greater membership growth for the moderate social-democratic parties than the communist parties affiliated to the Third International.

The third point I would like to stress is the need to look at the Stalinist regime and its hegemonic power in Central Europe after 1945 as an outcome of certain trends in Russian national history, and not as an example of Marxism in practice. (For example, the contest over Afghanistan between Russia and the Western powers began in the early

decades of the nineteenth century). Russia was devastated by German expansionism twice in the short space of twenty-five years, the first time as a Tsarist Empire, the second time as the USSR. The second occasion found her more prepared to face the onslaught than the first. The USSR fought alone for three years against a three million strong army that Hitler unleashed upon it in 1941, and lost over twenty million (two crore) lives in the process. The battle of Stalingrad alone cost 5 million (50 lakh) lives. We should not forget that the Red Army and the Russian people bore the brunt of the human cost of saving the world from a Hitlerian victory. If we consider the impact of the First World War on Russian national life, we can see that the need to counter the second Germanic invasion (everyone expected this, especially after Hitler's rise to power which began in the late 1920s) was a major motivating factor behind the accelerated industrialisation and collectivisation of the 1930s. And the establishment of puppet regimes in Central Europe after 1945 was a defensive reflex of a state that had paid the maximum price in two world wars. The history of German imperialism (and Russia's resistance to it) helps explain developments in Eastern and Central Europe for most of the twentieth century. The decline of the military-bureaucratic state system that was the Soviet camp during the second half of the twentieth century was a historical necessity, and should not be seen as the end of the socialist challenge.

The Crisis of the 1930s: Another major development in world history was the 1929 financial crash, which highlighted the inner tensions of the emerging capitalist world economy. The economic decline that followed (known as the Great Depression), resulted in factories and machines lying idle, job-losses for millions of workers and the spectacle of foodstuff rotting or being destroyed while people starved. Suddenly the Marxist critique of capitalism became more respectable, especially as the USSR seemed to be poised on an industrial take-off. Around this time John Maynard Keynes presented his *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, which advocated state intervention in the economy (via employment generation) over and above the mere regulation of financial activity. Keynes was by no means a socialist, and his intentions were to save the capitalist system from financially generated crisis and collapse. And we may analyse Keynesianism as the product of the impact of social democracy on bourgeois economic doctrine. Howsoever we look at it, Keynes' departure

from the dogma of laissez-faire economics showed a way out of mass unemployment and provided a theoretical basis for social-democratic participation in European governments. It also influenced American President Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s. Workers' distributional demands within capitalism could now be articulated without revolutionary rhetoric. The social-democratic class-collaborationism inspired by Keynesian economics became the basis for the emergence of the so-called welfare state of post-war Europe. We may name this phenomenon "capitalism with a human face".

I have mentioned elsewhere in the article, the characteristics of fascism and Nazism, in the 1930s. In part this was a consequence of the politics of militant nationalism and revenge, engendered by the aftermath of the First World War, in part by the Great Depression and mass unemployment. The mass-psychological and symbolic causes of the rise of fascism are crucial to an adequate understanding of this phenomenon. Its victory was not inevitable – Hitler could have been electorally defeated right up until 1933, had the German social-democrats and communists fought the Nazi party unitedly. For several reasons, this did not happen, and the world was dragged into the most violent conflict in humanity's history, culminating in the criminal acts such as the genocide of European Jews and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Following the triumph of Nazism, the policy of the Third International (or Comintern) turned in the direction of anti-fascist united fronts. Major developments took place in France, where a Popular Front ministry took power in 1936. In Spain, the monarchists, the Catholic Church, and the generals launched a coup d'etat against the Popular Front. This resulted in the Spanish Civil War (1936-38), in which the right led by General Franco were supported by Germany and Italy. The USSR intervened to support the Republic, but the policy imposed by it upon the republican forces, of confining the revolution within the constitutional framework even after the ruling classes had launched a military coup, led to inner division and final defeat in 1938. The governments of Britain and the USA remained neutral, and subsequent research has shown that they preferred to see the victory of the fascists than risk the emergence of another red republic. The tragedy of the Spanish Civil War was overshadowed by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

The significance of the Second World War: The Second World War could

be seen as a continuation of the first, given the many unsettled issues arising from the crisis of 1914-18. Although much opprobrium has been directed at the USSR for the so-called Nazi Soviet Pact of August 1939, the fact remains that Stalin had attempted an alliance with the western powers right up until a few weeks before that pact, but Britain did not want to guarantee the security of the USSR. Moreover, the British had conceded Hitler's domination of central Europe at the Munich Conference of October 1938. However, the micro-politics of the war's origins do not concern us here. In terms of war losses, the USSR was the greatest sufferer, as I have earlier mentioned. The following points are worth recounting:

First, in terms of the struggle against Hitlerism, the Second World War was a Soviet-German war with some peripheral action by British and American forces. At the height of the hostilities, in 1942-43, there were 186 German divisions in the Russian theatre, and only six stationed in France. The USSR fought the war with its own resources, war ordnance, and aircraft – American assistance was limited to clothing and transport. It was only in 1944, when the Red Army was pushing the Nazis out of central Europe, that the Anglo-American land offensive against Germany began.

Second, it was the Moscow agreement in late 1942 between Stalin and Churchill on their respective "spheres of influence" that set down the foundations for the partition of Europe.

Third, the determination of the British and French to retain their colonial empires gave the lie to Allied propaganda about freedom and democracy – this is why they re-armed the surrendered Japanese army in Vietnam in 1944 in order to obtain manpower for the war against the communist party and the Vietminh, who had fought the Japanese occupation. There are many such examples, including Indonesia, the Philippines and Korea.

Fourth, the war led to a tremendous growth of communist parties and the Left in various countries from Europe to Asia. In Europe the CPs were in the forefront of the anti-Nazi underground, in China and parts of East Asia, they led hegemonic nationalist movements. Thus, in 1939 membership of the CPs was estimated at one million, (ten lakhs). The Comintern was abolished by Stalin in 1943, but despite this, by 1945 the membership of worldwide communist parties had risen to 14 million. Once more, a spectre was haunting Europe, even the world.

Fifth, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was undertaken

to warn the USSR about American intentions to dominate the United Nations and the post-war global system. The refusal by the USSR to accept a subsidiary role or to vacate central Europe without adequate guarantees for her security and of the neutralisation of Germany, plus the refusal by the Vietnamese, Indians, Indonesians, etc to tolerate the continuation of colonialism by the Allied imperial powers formed the background for the advent of the Cold War.

Finally, at the end of the war there was a tremendous popular groundswell in favour of peace. This led to the establishment of the United Nations (for which plans were laid in the summit meetings of the Allies from 1942 onwards), and the beginnings of a system of global governance. One of the earliest decisions of the UN, the partition of Palestine (the USSR had voted for the creation of Israel in 1948), also turned out the most dangerous for world peace.

The Cold War and the Second Half of the Twentieth Century: The British intervention in Greece in 1944-47, inaugurated the Cold War. It was intended to secure the western sphere of influence agreed upon by Churchill and Stalin. It led to Soviet neutrality even as British troops assisted the Greek monarchist forces against the left-wing National Liberation Front, which wanted a democratic republic and land reforms. Concentration camps and press censorship were freely used by the leaders of the "free world" to crush a moderate democratic movement in Greece. It was during this period in 1946, that Churchill made his famous speech in Fulton (USA), in which he spoke of an "Iron Curtain" that now divided democratic from totalitarian regimes. Thereafter ultra-right-wing dictators became a favourite with Anglo-American policy-makers, as these were the most devoted anti-communists. Vietnam, Indonesia and Chile are a few prominent examples of this policy.

The Vietnam war was inaugurated by British Indian troops sent there in 1944 in order to accept the surrender of the Japanese and hand over the country back to the French. In this sense it was the last colonial war in nineteenth century style. It was also a nationalist struggle more than a communist one. General Giap, who presided over the defeats of three colonial powers, is certainly one of history's greatest generals – it is a pity that few people know that he is still alive. The war led to an American determination never again to intervene with land forces in Asia, it radicalised an entire generation of western youth, and gave occasion

to the US rapprochement with China. The radicalisation of civil society in the western world led to a renewed critique of capitalism, which was expressed most forcefully in the May 1968 uprising in France, when ten million workers went on the largest-ever lightning strike. There were other signs of global radicalisation – including the crisis of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe (the Prague Spring and subsequent Soviet invasion). and the anti-war movement in the USA. The late 1960s could be named the third moment of radical utopia in the twentieth century, the others being the periods 1917-21 and 1945-47, when the desire for revolutionary transformation actually gripped millions of people the world over. Utopia always recedes, but utopian moments leave their mark on history.

The rise of Solidarity and the Polish workers movement in the 1980s contributed to the end of the cold war, by bringing about the collapse of state-socialism. Regardless of their ideological stance, it was the working-class that fought for democracy in Poland. It is true that the western powers and the Vatican used the opportunity to undermine Soviet influence in Eastern Europe – but the roots of the problem lay in the grossly undemocratic and unpopular nature of the "socialist" regimes. It would be simplistic to blame it all on a CIA conspiracy. The Soviet bloc collapsed under its own weight, leaving us with the enormous task of comprehension.

This is a scanty outline of some facts and interpretations, there are a great many issues that I have left untouched. I must stress once more that we have lived through a very significant historical period and that popular struggles have contributed to some very positive developments. For example, the European Nuclear Disarmament movement of the 1980s (END), one of whose inspirational leaders was the English historian E.P. Thompson, played a major role in defusing nuclear tension over the Star Wars and MX missile programmes of NATO, and building public nuclear awareness. The collapse of apartheid in South Africa was another great popular victory for democracy – the strong presence of communists in the anti-apartheid movement demonstrated the stark links between social democracy and political democracy. The disappearance of the USSR and the rise of right-wing triumphalism came hand in hand, but today it is no longer possible for capitalist ideologues to explain the global crisis by a simple reference to the failures of socialism. Capitalist society is now face to face with itself.

Fascism as a global phenomenon

The history of fascism and Nazism deserves separate treatment which I will not attempt here. (I shall use the word 'fascism' to refer to both). After the violent events of the 1930s and 1940s, fascism can no longer be defined as purely European. I will sum up the overall defining characteristics of this historical tendency which is the very antithesis of socialism and democracy. These characteristics are as follows:

Fascism is radicalised conservatism – a fearful ideological response to democracy; its hatred for equality and citizenship is disguised by exclusivist forms of identity; fascist ideology depicts selected communities as the source of all social and political ills; it generates the militarisation of civil society, with constant preparation for civil war; it reduces the discipline of history to the legitimation of symbolic memory – to a record of victory and defeat; fascism glorifies violence as a 'masculine' virtue, evokes sentiment to justify violence; fascism joins criminality to political activity, uses democracy to destroy it.

Indian fascism – the century-long communal mobilization: The disastrous events of the 1930s and 1940s had a global impact, not least because they dragged the whole world into an anti-fascist war that cost nearly six crore lives. We are still living through its after-effects. Communalism is the Indian version of fascism. The fact that some people use the term "fascist" rhetorically does not mean that it can never be used with rigour. Indian fascism, like Indian capitalism, has been staggered in its development. Unfortunately, the Indian Left failed to understand the profound significance of communalism, and at one stage (through the Adhikari Resolution of 1942) the CPI endorsed the idea of Pakistan by artificially equating the national question in colonial India with the Bolshevik theory of Tsarism as a "prison of nations". By supporting the idea of a Muslim nation, the CPI ended up unwittingly bolstering the equally dangerous theory of Hindu Rashtra. For many years thereafter, the communist movement tended to treat so-called 'minority' communalism as something less dangerous than so-called 'majority' communalism. Not only was this an example of a doctrinal retreat – by accepting the arithmetic of communities rather than that of caste/class differentiation – it also demonstrated a fundamental analytical failure.

Fascism bases itself on fabricated and exclusive ethnic identity. The

complex and multifarious nature of ethnic differentiation in India gave Indian fascism its segmented character, which is its greatest strength. It must therefore be stressed that communalism is *one phenomenon with different manifestations rather than an arithmetical total of Hindu, Muslim or Sikh communalisms*. Its self-sustaining tendency derives precisely from this apparent binary structure, with each reproducing the other. To understand it, we must abstract from its compartment-like appearance, and concentrate on its generic uniformity, ie., on elements common to all types of communalism. Indian fascism's ideological method defines democracy in arithmetical rather than institutional terms, while despising democratic values; accords superiority to sentiment and hateful ethnic mobilisation over the requirements of civic order and criminal justice; uses so-called traditional values to express a fear of women and hostility to gender equality; and glorifies violence as a 'masculine' virtue. Once we have comprehended the fundamental unity of all communalisms, we may understand that Partition was the achievement of Indian, rather than Hindu or Muslim communalism. V.D. Savarkar was as much a believer in the Two Nation theory as Jinnah.

The theory of Hindu Rashtra, (whose roots lie in the late nineteenth century), apparently geared towards a unitary state, fueled the demand for a Muslim homeland. And the success of this demand strengthened the politics of Hindu Rashtra. Conservative social forces are obviously best allies of each other. In short, if Indian independence (as conceived of in the pre-1947 period) were to be imagined as an authoritarian state constructed around religious symbols, the logic of fragmentation (rather than unity) was always the likely outcome. This is why the emergence of Pakistan was the first step on the road to the partition of Pakistan itself. By the same logic, Hindu Rashtra and Akhand Bharat are mutually exclusive ideals. The political successes of Hindutva will push India towards further division and fragmentation.

Some persons are deceived by the presence of agreeable demands in rightwing politics. This is not logically an indication that it is not fascist. Demands to eradicate unemployment or corruption (etc.) are essential to fascism. Some are implementable, some purely rhetorical. The RSS will organise disaster relief, and the Shiv Sena will provide subsidised lunches. They might also demand the punishment of the guilty of 1984 (and never do it when they are in power). But the communalists will not hesitate to

undermine legal processes with regard to their own vicious activities. The fate of criminal prosecutions after the Babri Masjid demolition, the carnage of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 and the Bombay Riots of 1993 demonstrate this.

There remains an important matter that I should mention – that is, the similarities between Nazism and Stalinism in the matter of the repressive aspects of these regimes. The mainstream Indian Left has thus far not even acknowledged the widespread violence that took place in the USSR during the 1930s. We cannot dodge this question forever without the risk of moral cowardice. However, it must be said that a Marxist politics does not locate human evil in an ethnic community nor even in the capitalist class, but in certain iniquitous social relations. There have indeed been murderous Marxists, but the physical elimination of a whole class of persons, (howsoever defined), by degrading them to a subhuman status, does not logically flow from Marxist positions. This is not an apology for Stalinism but an underlining of the difference between Stalinism and Nazism. An interesting argument on this matter may be found in the preface to the Czech edition of J.P. Stern's book, *The Fuhrer and the People*, (Fontana, 1990). The further Marxists move from humanism to ethnicity as an approach towards ordinary people, the closer do they resemble fascists. I have no hesitation in describing the activities of Pol Pot as genocidal. Certain communists, being doctrinally contemptuous of ethical philosophy, and wedded to "scientism", never commit sins, only "errors" and "mistakes", even if those mistakes involve millions of dead bodies.

Since India has not yet been fully hegemonised by fascist politics, some of us hesitate to recognise its presence. This is because we refuse to see fascism as a political process, an outcome of socio-economic developments. The specific political expressions of this trend have their own fluctuations. Some fascists are successful, some not, some halfway there. Some are completely marginal. They cannot be judged solely by their successes. To recognise them for what they are only after they have murdered thousands is not a fruitful procedure. Elemental ingredients of fascism are present in political currents other than fascism, just as all human beings possess the capacity to indulge in highly destructive behaviour, (even if it remains unrealised or controlled). The reduction of the question of violence to the level of a tactic is the first sign of degeneration, followed by the elevation of violent instinct to a virtue. I speak of politics in the sense of a mass project, a developmental process.

The presence of these elements does not mean that such and such political activity is already fascist, just as futile would it be to say that all participants in communal rioting are fascists. Their growth into a stable political project is the defining moment.

The normalisation of brutality and the preparation for and installation of civil war as a fact of life are the consequence of fascist politics. Civil war has been taking place in South Asia for decades. Partition was an escalation of communalist civil war to geopolitical dimensions. Parts of independent India have been under armed occupation for most of 50 years, Sri Lanka is in the midst of civil war. Pakistan underwent civil war in 1971, and is today in the grip of what is called the "nationality problem". These are examples of staggered fascism at work. But the Indian Left still does not have an understanding of fascism. Some of us are fixated by European paradigms. Since we think civil war is the only way to combat fascists, and since we are in no position to launch civil war, we come to the simple conclusion that there is no fascist movement to combat. This attitude was prevalent in the mainstream Left for years. Thus, collaborating with fascists was impossible for communists after 1945. But if the CPs wanted to collaborate with the RSS political fronts or with the Muslim League on an antiCongress platform, all they had to do was to refuse to acknowledge their fascist character. They did this until 1989. Indian fascism has already indulged in civil war spread over decades and we surely do not need any more civil war to resist it. But resist it we must.

Communalism is one project with several faces, a veritable hydraheaded monster. Its object is not upholding Hindu or Muslim "culture and traditions". To the contrary, if indeed there is any Hindu or Muslim culture as popularly practiced, communalism is destroying it. Its object is to undermine democratic politics and to forestall the potential of social democracy. Given the lakhs of people killed in the riots before and after Partition and the wars over Kashmir and Bangladesh, the tens of thousands killed in massacres such as those which took place in 1969, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1990 and 19923 etc., this project has had many successes, and is still unfolding. Communal violence reinforces communal identities. Its function is to undermine citizenship in order to maintain the 'traditional' recruitment and regulatory structures of informal labour. It has undermined the evolution of civic culture, citizenship and a functioning regulatory apparatus that might benefit millions of labouring poor. It has

almost completely demolished the criminal justice system. Vast numbers of army and policemen in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India think communally – for them the concept of a citizen with inalienable rights regardless of religion would be unthinkable, and a secular state an example of deracinement.

What concerns me is a realistic understanding of the function of communal politics. It signifies the destruction of rational discourse, and an erosion of democratic values and institutions to the detriment of those who most need a democratic constitution to protect themselves. Its method is that of the protection racket – give us power or we shall keep on murdering innocent citizens. Like all criminal power seekers, they will appeal for public order after they attain the throne. It is the brutalisation of human conscience that is most tragic. I still remember the carnival atmosphere that gripped the middle-class colonies in Delhi while their residents watched Sikh citizens being beaten to death or burnt alive in 1984. Muslims of Pakistan paid the maximum price for "their" version of a victorious communalism. They are still doing so. The historical price of Hindutva's victories has yet to be gauged.

The necessity of social-democracy

If I were to summarise the mobilisational needs of Indian socialism, it would be in the following simple requirements:

1. Formation of unions of rural workers, artisans and so-called "informal sector" labour for struggles around minimum wages, equal pay for men and women, and against acts of extra-economic exploitation and oppression
2. Articulation of the demands of urban poor and middle classes around both working-class and 'stakeholder' issues concerning transport, housing, energy, education and environment.
3. Formulating and agitating for social-democratic programmes on land relations, working conditions and workers control of industry, and ecologically sound policies on water, toxic waste disposal, food production and forestry.
4. Defence of citizenship and development of democratic institutions at all levels of society; resistance to communalist, chauvinist and hate-mongering politics; to caste and gender-based discrimination.

These elements, to my mind, are the lowest common denominator of a social-democratic programme for the Indian Left. A united front of democratic forces committed to social justice, economic redistribution and cultural pluralism would be immensely popular with ordinary Indians. But unity around a common programme has become impossible for the several factions of leftists, who have yet to produce an explanation of their own marginalisation in a country whose conditions cry out for a socialist movement. I have tried to indicate why this is so – but we are still far from a clear understanding. I will now state some propositions towards that end. These will be more contentious than the above.

There are three ways in which the word 'socialism' may be used; the first refers to the doctrine of the liberation of labour, the second refers to an existing socio- economic system, and the third refers to a movement. Confusion arises when we unconsciously employ interchanging usages. The doctrines of socialism are in crisis because of their failure to explain events of recent decades (except in terms of 'betrayal' etc.). The crisis need not be permanent – but socialist theory has to face the challenge. The social system known as the 'socialist bloc' has all but disappeared. China, Vietnam and Cuba, the countries still under the rule of communist parties, hardly see themselves as the vanguard of world revolution. It seems that the first phase of 'transition' has ended, and the experience has to be interpreted. Was this the pre-history of socialism, a phase of militant nationalist resistance to imperialism rather than the emergence of an alternative to capitalism? We have to digest and learn lessons from this rich and painful history. Finally, socialism refers to a social movement – the need for which is constantly generated from the very ground of capitalist society and oppressive social relations. A new social movement of opposition to capitalism is already in formation, and it is self-consciously taking international forms. How it will develop depends on all of us.

The crisis of revolutionary doctrine has one root in the history of Leninism with its programmatic presumptions of absolute truth; and its dubious concept of the 'Outside'. The ossification of critical thought in the Indian Left is partly the product of the resonance between Brahmanical and Leninist epistemology, both of which presume a social division between those who possess knowledge (seen as an entitlement to power), and those who work. An absolutist starting point also generates the approach of using theory as a means of sectarian demarcation, rather than

understanding and changing social reality. The purveyors of this outlook may be named the "aristocracy of the intellect". The view that a certain caste or a group of theoreticians are naturally qualified to produce the truth for society is at heart antithetical to "the democracy of the intellect", which alone can develop the resources for social transformation.

This dogmatic approach to knowledge was the reason why left-wing theory could not deal with categories of caste and gender as they operate in Indian society. Thus, it is apparent that the Indian population during the years of nationalist mobilisation tended to align themselves along class-oriented *as well as* conventional lines, making confederations of caste. Organisations of class interests emerged, but so did estates (as I suggest we name them) of caste-interest. What is significant is that these estates were not the traditional forms of caste society, but novel means of political organisation. They were traditional in name, but modern in function. Among the tasks of a rejuvenated Indian socialism would be the analysis of how class interests are represented in caste-federations, such as the Dalit, OBC and *savarna* estates. New organisational methods would stress inclusion rather than exclusion, theoretical exploration rather than final, absolute truth. This would help achieve maximum unity on a minimum platform, in contrast to the approach of "minimum unity on maximum programme", which has only resulted in fragmentation.

The crisis of the radical sensibility (this is not merely an Indian phenomenon) is exemplified by ethical nihilism (generated by post-modernist relativism), the glorification of smallness, a belief in economic autarky (swadeshi), and confusion over the politics of identity, violence, and nationalism. Whereas Marxism's best known slogan used to be, "Workers of all countries, unite!", today *the platform of internationalism has been vacated by the socialist movement and occupied by MNCs and finance capital*. There is an urgent need to revitalise the critique of capitalism, to analyse the mythic notion that capitalist relations are natural, and that 'growth' will eventually lead to universal peace and prosperity. On a global scale, the capitalist system generates violence and conflict, not prosperity and growth. Most of all, it endangers democratic institutions and undermines human equality.

Social democracy involves the emergence of an ethically defined community – a community based not on ethnic but normative elements. The central features of these socialist values are: human and gender

equality, the dignity of life and labour; and social justice. To these we must add *ahimsa* and *karuna*, which are Gandhiji's contribution to the vocabulary of humanitarian politics, of respect for human life. Violence is the underlying grammar of every type of oppressive social relation. Devoid of the value of *ahimsa*, the socialist movement will remain caught in a vicious cycle defined by the traditions of the past, rather than the needs of the future. Finally, it must stop habitually confining itself within adversarial politics and adopt the posture of owning democracy and whole-heartedly participating in the development of democratic institutions.

Historical reality has always challenged theory. It is time once more for theory to challenge reality. We are not the fortunate witnesses of 'History's end'. Can our ideals, thought processes and imagination keep pace with history? If not, we may only look forward to nuclear war, communal conflicts and onslaughts on the rights and living standards of working people. If we can, we may yet embark upon designing the history of the future.

Addendum on cultural provenance of fascism:

On the matter of whether there are any traditional ingredients of fascism in Indian culture, this was a very important question which I failed to answer in the aftermath of my lecture. Upon consideration, I have the following comment. It is this: certain norms and conventions of Brahmanic culture militate against the ideals of human equality. Prominent among these are legal doctrines (or values stemming therefrom) which delineate crime and punishment within a hierarchical universe, according to the status of the wrongdoer rather than the crime committed. Texts such as the *Manusmriti*, the *Satapatha Brahmana* and the *Arthasastra*, make it clear that concepts of truth, wrongdoing and punishment are relative to the caste of the persons involved. Brahmins were repositories of truth, were exempt from corporal punishment, and along with Kshatriyas, from the payment of taxes. *Gautama Dharmasutra (an early Sanskrit text)* even permits a Brahmin to help himself to the money of a Sudra by force to defray the expenses of a marriage or ritual... Sudras (in some texts the very representation of untruth), were excluded from the pursuit of knowledge, condemned to a life of hard labour, could expect no civil or religious rights,

and liable to severe corporal punishments.

Real life often deviated from these clear-cut norms, but the fact remains that the prescriptions governing individual conduct differed according to rank, as did punishments for the same offence. The stamina of these ideals caused much irritation to the administrators of the East India Company in the late eighteenth century. Thus, Brahmins in Benaras were exempt from capital punishment till 1813, after which too, they could not be hanged within the city precincts. In addition, Macaulay's draft penal code of 1837, permitted judicial discretion on the length of the sentence for rape, (two to fourteen years), on grounds of the status of the victim. The rape of an upper caste woman by a lowcaste man was deemed more grievous a crime than the molestation of low caste women. More information on this is available in Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India*, (O.U.P., Delhi, 1998, pp. 101102).

To this I will add Ambedkar's comments on Brahmanical ideology, which he refers to as the "negation of liberty, equality and fraternity". He likens it to Nietzsche's philosophy, which he identifies with "power, violence and debasement of the common man", and is "capable of producing Nazism". My point is that there are indeed, philosophical traditions in Indian culture that can feed a modern fascist ideology. They conflict with the ideals of the Constitution, which is based on a notion of human equality. Even though this Constitution is not implemented, we should note that it is under siege precisely by those forces which wish to replace it with a more authoritarian structure. I have not referred to them here, but undoubtedly, there are iniquitous tendencies in conservative Islam as well, that can militate against democratic values. I accept that these points need to be debated more fully, nevertheless, I feel that they are important enough to be publicly placed for discussion.

This essay originated as the Chandrasekhar Memorial Lecture, delivered in Patna on September 20, 2000. It has since been revised and is being re-presented for debate.

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A White Line and a Mosque

Ordinary people often avoid self-definition, but the commanders of identity insist on clear demarcation.

In the year of grace 1989 I visited the Wagah border with a friend. It was evening, time for the lowering of flags, for the BSF and Pakistan Rangers to perform their beautifully choreographed ceremony with goose-steps and challenging gestures. I saw coolies, uniformed men and tourists look at each other with friendly curiosity, children being held up on parental shoulders to catch a better glimpse of the Other country, yards near and years apart. Some were chatting with the men in uniform to get permission for a brief foray across the forbidden line. So much symbolic meaning, such deep historic memories concentrated in such an ordinary space – the good old GT Road, Punjab's lush green fields, eucalyptus trees, two iron gates. And that thick white line.

Have you ever come across the term `sub-liminal'? It means an image which lies just outside one's awareness. The dictionary defines `liminal' as being situated in a position on or on both sides of a boundary or threshold. It also means "pertaining to or constituting a transitional or initial stage of a process"; and, "marginal, insignificant, incidental". I thought more about the word and I realised there were problems, logical ones, which held back my comprehension. What were the defining limits of "an initial stage"? The space of a "process"? Did words like *stage, process, position*, imply that liminal existence possesses an entity of its own? No, the word sounded like a bit of jargon, of no use to ordinary people...

But when I saw the coolies treading on a white line twelve inches wide, I began to understand the ordinariness of liminality. Whom did the line belong to? Was there another razor-sharp line, or a tiny space between the first six inches and the next six inches? Did not the six inches on either side draw into their respective magnetic fields the space up to each gate? Was that space just a few yards broad or did it extend backwards for hundreds of miles, incorporating millions of persons? And what of the little crowd which gazed wistfully across the metal barriers? Why did the frontier-tourists secretly wish to imitate the coolies, walk right up to the twelve-inch white line and put their foot across it? What did it mean to go back home and say they had crossed over? How would it be to stand with one foot on either side of the white line? Better still, with both feet squarely on the line's twelve inches?

Liminality. That was the word for the ambience surrounding the painted line across the Grand Trunk Road. The footfalls of the coolies, the colours of their shirts, the synchronized steps, the gestures of the soldiers were all markers of their liminal status. The intense desire in many assembled hearts to step across the line, if only for an instant, brought them too, within the sphere of liminality. I began to glimpse the meaning of the term "moment of truth".

Years later, in the summer of 2000, I visited Northern Ireland. The gently rolling countryside, the blue-green tint in the vegetation, the laughter in the faces of ordinary people. What a beautiful country. I forgot to visit the border to see another artificial line, also drawn by Englishmen. But suddenly, in Belfast, I did not need to. For there, in the middle of neighbourhoods, separating one street from another, or the same street from itself, were tall sheets of steel, through which not even a ray of light could pass. There were gates blocking roads, kerbs painted with the conflicting colours of Nationalism and Loyalism. There were huge wall murals reminding the Irish of their bloody past, asking them to continue their struggle to unite the Republic despite the objections of the Loyalists or to keep it divided despite the aspirations of the Nationalists. I saw a loyalist mural in which a black-hooded warrior pointed a rifle straight in the face of its viewers. The border was in the street, everywhere. Unity in Separation. "Decommissioning weapons?" said my guide, an Englishman living in Belfast who has devoted himself to communal harmony, like some mad people in my country. "The IRA can easily get fresh weapons. We have

got to decommission the mind", he said, tapping his forehead.

Weeks later, I found myself outside the stone huts of Bhil rural labourers on the outskirts of Jodhpur. They had taken refuge from religious persecution in Pakistan. Here, officially designated as Pak-Oustees, they live on an allotted space, under government scrutiny, subject to the rapacity of stone-quarry contractors and the lesser constabulary. "What shall we do babu?" one of them asked me. "Over there we were called Hindustanis... here we are known as Pakistanis. But we are just workers. May we not live in peace?". I thought sadly to myself, "no, you have to carry a border around with yourselves – it's a part of our glorious historical heritage."

I approach another threshold, the threshold of comprehension. I think about how nations may suspend themselves in liminality, in frozen contemplation of a painted line bequeathed to them by their forefathers. How communities like to see themselves as mirror images of each other. How ordinary people often avoid self-definition while the commanders of identity insist on clear demarcation. How a sixteenth century mosque became a twentieth century disputed structure for a few years, returned to the status of a mosque for a few hours while it was in transition to a heap of rubble, and then, as rubble, was transformed yet again into an imaginary mosque where alone an as-yet imaginary temple might be forthcoming. How such a temple would only have value if it occupied the precise space where stood the ghost of the mosque... Why a spectacle celebrating the sacred weaponry of the Gurus may be fully enjoyed only when the all-too-real weapons of terror have been silenced. Why those who defy the law get to the position where they lay down the law. Why what is known is often unspoken, and what is spoken is often unknown. Why half-truths are lies on the verge of becoming truths.

I begin to apprehend a liminal space whose boundary is shared by wisdom and ignorance, love and hate, violence and non-violence, means and ends. Liminal because each conjures up the other. Because ignorant people can have flashes of wisdom, because hatred is a fixation. Because *ahimsa* is not the name of passivity and surrender, but of resilience. As long as the circumstances which incubate division persist, non-violence will linger on a sub-liminal threshold. The time spent on that invisible line will be fraught. But tension will be our fate until we cross the barrier, and it vanishes behind us, so that we never again want to go back.

My mind transports me back to Northern Ireland, the city of Derry. Not Londonderry anymore. My brief sojourn was marked by an experience of great friendship and warmth from the Irish. I said so to my gracious hostess Mari Fitzduff, a woman who has worked indefatigably for peace over the decades. You are such wonderful, generous and musical people… my appreciation was loaded with an unspoken question. Her intuitive response told me much about India. "We love strangers, Dilip", she said, "except our own". Our strangers. Our mound of rubble. Weep a tear for our disputed structure. That's liminality for you. For us all.

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MAY 9, 2001, ADDRESS AT THE DOCUMENTA SYMPOSIUM

A Finer Balance – The Possibility of Reconciliation

Historical knowledge must be pursued with respect, balance and freedom from the fear of cultural and intellectual policing. This is essential for any reconciliation.

Introduction

I begin this address by a simple reflection on the key words in the title of this symposium – truth, justice, reconciliation. They mean a great deal to me intellectually and emotionally, and they are always accompanied by a question mark. Is there any such thing as truth, will there ever be a just society, and can we dare to hope for reconciliation? Like all great concepts they are too full of meaning to admit of any certitude. The title goes further – it speaks of experiments with truth, transitional justice, and processes of reconciliation. These phrases in turn, contain much food for thought, especially for Indians.

It was an Indian, one of the greatest figures of the past century, who coined that germ of a Brahmasutra, "experiments with truth", as his unique contribution to ethical philosophy. In its own way, this concept challenges the epistemological authoritarianism of market-liberalism, Leninism, and the monoliths of identity, while (in conjunction with the concept of ahimsa), suggesting an alternative to the nihilist ethics of post-modernity. The concept of transitional justice is also one to which Indian experience speaks in a special way. Our transitions are different from the stark changes in South Africa and Germany – yet they remain as painful. We are in perpetual states of temperamental, cultural, geopolitical and

economic transition. Our social space is suspended between tradition and modernity, we exist as a people comprised of communities and also as a democratic nationstate of individual citizens, our economy lies poised between regulation and the lack of it, our cultural and religious psyche does not know what to preserve and what to forget. Our notions of justice veer between a hierarchical sensibility that calibrates punishment according to the status of wrongdoers, and a jurisprudence that theoretically considers all citizens equal before the law. We know we are in transition. The only problem is that we don't know where the transition is headed.

Again, the practice of reconciliation is something we desperately need to learn. Vast areas in the sub-continent have remained under martial law for decades. The number of orphans in the Kashmir valley run into the tens of thousands. Violence and terror have acquired a seamless trajectory. Communal and ethnic hatreds lurk beneath the surface of everyday life. The glorification of "masculine" virtue is a national pastime. And yet we Indians prefer to cling to our favourite symbolised grievances than to take the smallest steps towards comprehension and resolution.

The Threads of an Argument

The logic of my arguments will take the following trajectory, and base itself on the recognition that:

- Truth, justice and reconciliation are sorely needed.
- Because they mean so many things to so many people, we must adopt certain rules of restraint and non-violence while we live and discover what they are.
- A society whose proclaimed leaders do not adhere to such rules, or have an equivocal stance towards political violence, is headed for self-destruction.
- Democracy and human equality are relatively youthful concepts in the Asian polity, and even globally.
- The extension of these principles to the world economy is still not acceptable to those who occupy its commanding heights.
- Destitution and oppression are still the common experience of millions of people, and while this lasts the preservation of democracy is crucial to the fulfilment of modest aspirations.

- Reconciliation is only possible between equals and cannot even be attempted when various conflicting parties humiliate and stifle one another.
- A properly functional judicial system is crucial to social stability.
- Judges, like the rest of us are mere mortals, therefore the sense of justice and fair play has to be sustained by a social ethos and enlightened public opinion.

Of Violence

Systems of gross inequity are held together by and depend upon violence. This could be applied both internally and externally. The fact that ours is such a brutal age with such a large volume of human energy and resources devoted to armaments, police and paramilitaries, is an indicator of its iniquitous character. The substitution of police methods instead of an institutional, social ethic for resolving social conflict demonstrates the poverty of liberal theory. For example, the invention of a uniform, commercial common sense of the market is a manifestation of epistemic violence, one of those 'universals' that post-modernism prefers to ignore.

The word 'violence' itself has become tinged with euphemism in its usage.[1] It obscures the reality of knives cutting through human flesh, warm blood on the pavement, of children screaming, of pain and fear and agony. Yes, violence is unfortunate we say, but what of all those horrific things that happen in the name of honour, glory and revenge? The language of vengeance and glory reminds me of the double peg of rum that is imbibed by soldiers prior to the act of legalised murder – it deadens the nerves to prepare us for a journey into hell. The ruling elites of South Asia have long been accustomed to the use of incendiary language in the pursuit of power.

What are the psychic roots of the normalisation of brutality? One of them, certainly, is the appeal of victimhood. One of the effects of identity politics is the conversion of all Jews, Muslims, Hindus etc. into the permanent theoretical victims of their preferred enemies. Victims become interchangeable with culprits – as Hans Magnus Enzenzberger points out in his book *Civil Wars*, the notion of the "innocent victim" is rendered meaningless in a situation such as that which overtook the erstwhile

1 I am indebted to Professor Namwar Singh for this insight

Yugoslavia. Women widowed by one atrocity picket the roads to prevent medical supplies reaching survivors of another atrocity. Young men take up arms to do unto others what others did unto them. And how do we define child soldiers, who are filling the ranks of paramilitaries from Sri Lanka to Liberia? Are they victims or criminals?

We have to accept the uncomfortable truth that the ubiquitous language of brutality has pushed victims and perpetrators together into a seamless whole. Not only are things of terror conceived in moments of beauty, but terror is the site to which its victims return as terrorists, having rendered, in their fervid imagination, vengeance itself into an aesthetic. We are confronted with incipient fascism – the doctrine of revenge elevated to ideological status. Do we not know its consequences? In daily life we occupy a space on the edge of barbarism, despite the patina of civility and regulated forms. Every now and then we obtain a glimpse of the abyss – the schools of modern America, the killing fields of Yugoslavia, the wasteland on the West Bank, the prisons of Brazil, the streets of Soweto, the mind of the Taliban. And here in South Asia we keep victimhood as a talisman of identity, thus ensuring that we shall never be far from that edge.

Civil society is now riven with the debate over state violations of human rights versus similar violations by the 'militants' who supposedly represent oppressed people, minorities, etc. Parochial movements also appear in a wide spectrum with their own moderate and extremist fringes who use each other with pragmatic cynicism. We invest much political energy in constructing cultural-ethnic identity as the quintessential historical 'Subject'. We may even justify extreme forms of violence in the name of the oppressed. We transfer and preserve our most brutal impulses onto the boundary-zone provided by identity. (That is why we are so addicted to boundaries).

Yet, when we are faced with the consequences of our actions – which evoke further brutality – we claim protection under the banner of universal human rights. We employ exclusive language in the search for power, and appeal to an inclusive category when we need breathing space. This ethical opportunism is present in the language of statehood as well as of resistance. Remember, that today's states are run mostly by yesterday's rebels. The tactical and unreflective approach to violence in the language of resistance is symptomatic of the ideological reach of

pragmatism. Indeed, the similarity of approach to this question across the political spectrum demonstrates the hegemony of oppression without which patriarchy and exploitation would be impossible. Violence tends to blur political distinctions – note the contemporary ideological fuzziness and blurring of distinctions between Right and Left. It also leads inevitably towards de-politicisation, owing to the advent of armed bodies specialising in killing and the brutal momentum of retribution.

The Need for Critical Theory

A dismissive attitude towards theoretical reasoning, its representation as the esoteric activity of elitist individuals, and its juxtaposition to so-called activism is popular with many social and political activists, including those in the burgeoning 'NGO sector'. Such an attitude generates cynicism, frustration and fragmentation. Whether we like it or not, humans are fated to make sense of our environment. Faced with severe social crises, we have no option but to examine systems and causes. It is not enough to seek explanations that reduce everything to 'human nature'. We have to engage with the issue of structure.

Let us begin with the logic of democracy, whose idea and practice are linked to the concept of identity. The 'rule of the people' presupposes that we know who 'the people' are, even before we speak of their right to 'self-determination'. Democracy presupposes definitions of the 'self', and the ideologically defined boundaries of 'the people'. This issue is related to the birth of the nation-state and to the notion of sovereignty. Identity is an ideological construction and therefore, a matter of political power and class interest. For example, the slogan that the Kashmiris have a right to "self-determination" implies that the identity of Kashmiris is self-evident. The moment the issue of the identity of Ladakhis or Dogras is brought into the argument, the latent authoritarianism of unilateral definitions becomes evident. We also need to distinguish between various streams of identity – religion-based, ethnic, linguistic, etc.

The exploitation of labour has always been linked to identity. This is true with regard to the African slaves on American cotton plantations, Tamil tea-garden workers in Sri Lanka, Irish builders of British railroads, and the thousands of Indian indentured labourers, mostly of the so-called 'low castes' who were sent all over the British Empire to work

on plantations. Identity has played a crucial role in extra-economic oppression, serving to intensify the exploitative process. However, political mobilisation around categories whose usage fluctuates between legal, ideological and rhetorical definitions, creates confusion. The problem is whether they are used in an inclusive or exclusive manner. Thus, identity combined with the experience of labour, or in opposition to systematic humiliation can help build bridges between all oppressed people, but an exclusive usage can create division and bitterness instead.

Identity is also subject to the logic of internal fragmentation, as more identities are generated within the confines of the community being constructed. We may also note that those who speak the language of 'minority rights' often ignore the rights of minorities *within* the minorities, or individual rights. In its exclusivist form, by attaching virtue and vice to entire communities, identity politics enables India's elite to erode the rights and status of the individual citizen, and thereby subvert Indian democracy. For example, when communal violence is condoned by the legal system, this implies that all of us do not enjoy equal protection under the law

Take the issue of citizenship. Is this an abstraction that needs to be done away with, and replaced by a collection of identities? The institution of citizenship is constantly undermined by the "ragged edges of reality", but cannot, for that reason, be consigned to the dustbin. Particularly when it is under attack by social forces that find democracy inconvenient. Economic and social injustice incessantly undermines the legal, political form of equality. Citizenship cannot remain unscathed by social stigma and economic servitude. Nevertheless, legal equality should not be seen as an abstract category imposed upon 'traditional' communities, but as a toehold that the poor can use to actualise social democracy.

Democratic constitutional rights are one of the platforms from which the working poor may defend itself and improve their living and working conditions. Coalitions of exclusive identity cannot accomplish this goal, for they are oriented towards symbolic rather than substantive attainments. Insofar as they accentuate authoritarian tendencies in the polity, they might even undermine the rights of free speech, association and peaceful agitation. The economy cannot function for a day without a working class, but judging from the language of today's politics, labour as a category has ceased to exist, save as a "factor of production". This is an indicator of the profoundly conservative ethos that has been generated during the last

decade of the previous century. I have no doubt that it will change.

Critical social theory must engage with this question, as also with the possibility of a democratic division of labour at global and local levels, an economy that is not left to the supposedly benevolent hidden hand of market forces. What of the phenomena of informality and lack of regulation that are characteristic of the Indian economy? The dominant discourses of Indian economic nationalism have always boasted about the cheapness of Indian labour. Why is this a matter of pride? The control of mindless consumerism is one thing, but the cheapness of labour in India is achieved under the threat of destitution. Would not a more humane standard of life and work for the nearly four hundred million casual and agrarian workers and their families create a massive surge in demand patterns, and a boom for the capitalist economy?

Why does this not happen, why does the regulation of labouring conditions come so low on the list of priorities for Indian planners? I suggest that they are satisfied by the self-regulatory mechanisms that are already in place, and that go by the name of tradition, convention and caste. From the standpoint of those who work, these phenomena are nothing but a structure of physical intimidation, lubricated by the customary prejudices of caste society. Prejudices against the poor are now taken for granted – thus, slums and pollution must be dealt with not by improving remuneration, working conditions and housing, but by throwing the poor out of the city precincts. Social Darwinism has taken the place of social theory.

Symptoms of degeneration are there for all to see. The lack of accountability has become all-pervasive, and is manifested as a decline of professionalism in many middle-class occupations. Elements of the medical fraternity appear to have completely forgotten the Hippocratic oath. Lengthy are the lists of policemen indicted by commissions of inquiry into communal riots who have ended up being rewarded with promotions. It is no secret that the majority of applicants to the civil services these days select Customs or Revenue (Income Tax) as their first choice out of a possible 24 professions. With due respect to those of my ex-colleagues who have devoted themselves to the maintenance of academic standards, I must say that rampant absenteeism in the teaching profession has contributed greatly to the abysmal state of university education. Massive scandals periodically shake the world of banking and the stock-markets. The

political class has plumbed the depths of cynicism and criminality. But the commonly understood meaning of corruption still reduces its causes to flaws in individual character and its scope to monetary matters alone.

There is much to be said on this matter. To start with, corruption means the "perversion from fidelity". Its meaning must also extend to the perversion of political and judicial institutions. Filling the atmosphere with communal hatred, inciting violence for political ends, suborning the loyalty of the police and military, pouring contempt upon the rule of law, treating some citizens as less worthy of remaining alive than others, remaining in public office while criminal proceedings are pending against you – all these phenomena are also symptoms of corruption. They are part of a systemic malaise, the locus of which is the subversion of democracy for the fulfilment of privileged interests. The common-sense definition of corruption detracts from broader issues. The most important among these is the need to consider the lack of regulation as a systemic, not an individual problem.[2]

There is another burning issue that could do with critical reflection. For many years, the Indian secular tradition tended to treat communalism as a collection of discrete religiously- oriented ideologies, some less dangerous than others. This was a massive analytical failure, one that strengthened the incipient fascist tendencies on the rampage today. Historically, fascism based itself on fabricated and exclusive ethnic identity. However, the multifarious nature of ethnic differentiation in India gave Indian fascism its segmented character, which is its greatest strength. Communalism (which I understand as the Indian version of fascism) was always *one phenomenon with different manifestations rather than an arithmetical total of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh etc., communalisms*. Its self-sustaining tendency derived precisely from this apparent discrete structure, with each reproducing the other. We need to abstract from its compartment-like appearance, and concentrate on its generic uniformity.

2 This ideological beguilement in matters of intense public concern is not confined to India. It has been suggested that "the taking of bribes by government officials in these (East European) countries can be viewed with equanimity to the extent that it at least indicates an understanding of how market forces operate in a liberal economic environment": *Transparency International Newsletter*, September 1996, cited by Harry Shutt, *The Trouble with Capitalism – An Enquiry into the Causes of Global Economic Failure*, Zed Books, London and New York, 1998, p. 168.

Indian fascism's ideological method defines democracy in arithmetical rather than institutional terms, despises democratic values; and accords superiority to hateful ethnic mobilisation over the requirements of civic order and criminal justice. It uses so-called traditional values to express a fear of women and hostility to gender equality; it also glorifies violence as a 'masculine' virtue. Once we have comprehended the fundamental unity of all communalisms, we may understand that the Partition of India in 1947 was the achievement of Indian, rather than Hindu or Muslim communalism. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was as much a believer in the Two Nation theory as Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

Finally, we urgently need an understanding of political conservatism. The conservative world view is not blindly opposed to things foreign – despite its sanctification of domesticity to the level of virtue – it is inconsistent in this regard. Technology is acceptable, as long as it may be bent to the needs of state violence. Thus, pragmatism shows itself to be a natural adjunct of conservatism. Nor is it opposed to violence – even of the extra-judicial variety. It is important to stress that *today's Indian and South Asian elite is quite amenable to the pragmatic deployment of political violence,* just as long this violence is not directed at their economic privileges. Narratives of hurt religious sentiment, racial victimisation and thwarted imperialist destiny are the means by which the high and the mighty seek legitimation for extra-judicial violence.

The Perils of Absolute Truth

A major problem is the appeal of the notion of Absolute Truth. That this or that 'revealed truth' is the last word in perfection is a state of mind incompatible with intellectual growth and the democracy of the intellect, which to my mind are major markers of social progress. They also conduce to authoritarianism and violence, emanating from both the state and its opponents. Among the many reasons for the eclipse of Soviet socialism was its paranoid stance towards ideas, its tendency to control and suppress the rich Russian intellectual heritage. Communist systems became too akin to the structures of medieval Catholicism. Mixed with traditions of Tsarist absolutism and caesaropapism (the confluence of state power with religious authority), it became its own worst enemy. Hegel's "cunning of reason" stood the first Marxist state on its head. The sin of hubris – in

this case of the Left – brought nemesis upon it as it will upon all those who claim that infallible knowledge gives them the right to commit irrevocable deeds. This includes the neo-conservative currents that seek to hegemonise race, religion, sentiment and identity in order to perform a demolition job on democracy. No, it is better to accept the tentative nature of truth, and strengthen our search with restraint of body and spirit.

The latest avatar of epistemological absolutism is the elevated status of sentiment in Indian popular and political discourse. (*Hamari bhavnaon ko thes pahunchi hai* – Hindi for 'our feelings have been hurt' is our most popular phrase). The practitioners of wounded sentiment have attained political power in recent years, and the country is agog with their success. Sundry politicians have busied themselves in the excavation of things and matters to attach to their outrage. The most significant consequence of this trend is the justification that self-appointed guardians of morality have obtained for violence and defiance of law, for cultural policing, book-burning, and the intimidation of artists and creative activity in general. Film screenings have been disrupted, writers and painters threatened and beaten up, academic work and speculation subjected to the promise of dire consequences. These tendencies have their resonance in the realm of the mind. By valorising particularity, fragmentation and multiplicity in an imbalanced manner and at the cost of the quest for wholeness, the so-called post-modern sensibility has contributed to the erosion of moral values and the rise of ethical nihilism.

Truth is the whole, said Hegel – this for me is another reminder of the need for balance. But the balance that is akin to truth is not the mere weighment of equal amounts, an artificial and abstract middle ground of vacuous neutrality. It is based rather on an acknowledgement of the multifarious nature of historical experience, the recognition of complexity and a capacity to exercise judgement. But to judge one has to possess a standard of judgement, one that holds good in practical terms, even after the acceptance of difference. That practical standard can only be non-violence. This truth engenders growth in human wisdom, and the transcendence rather than negation of the past. It is that which stares us in the face, but we are too cowardly to recognize, for fear of losing face, losing innocence.

Is it so difficult for left-wing intellectuals to acknowledge that horrible crimes were committed in the name of workers liberation? For nationalists

to see the evil that their nation is capable of? Revanchist forms of history-writing are asserting themselves the world over, from Germany to Japan, Russia to Britain. Justifications are produced for colonialism, imperial conquest and even racism. Having overcome the paranoia of the Cold War the western world is inventing novel reasons for keeping the military-industrial complex in business. Today, in India, we have a government bent upon replacing historical thought altogether, save for a litany of complaints about invaders invariably represented as Muslim. We are dangerously close to elevating communal prejudice to the level of state ideology. In Pakistan, on the other hand, history lessons begin with the arrival of Islam; the ideological foundation of the state is focused on an animus towards India and Hindus, and the impossibility of co-existence. If the very structures of power are so dependent upon animosity, how may we hope for reconciliation?

Justice and the Judiciary

It is difficult to speak of the system of justice without a sense of despair. Indian justice does not have much to do with the truth these days. A notorious case of caste prejudice causing a miscarriage of justice is that of Bhanwari Devi, a village-level social worker or *sathin* in Rajasthan, who was employed under the Women's Development Programme for implementing official policy on empowerment. This included the prevention of child marriage and female infanticide, the protection of rape victims, and issues in health and education. On September 22, 1992, Bhanwari was gang-raped in the presence of her husband (who was severely beaten) by five upper-caste men incensed by her campaign against child marriage. The dilatory tactics of the police in response to her complaints were a personal ordeal, but the judgement of the Trial Court acquitting the rapists caused dismay among women's organisations. The judge averred that no Indian rustic would stand by while his wife was being raped, so the complainant must have lied. He added that being "upper-caste" the alleged offenders could not have touched, much less raped a "low-caste" woman. Cases of molestation of 'low-caste' women by 'upper-caste' men in India are legion – yet this fact made no difference to the learned judge.

In November 1984, there took place one of the most shameful events

in independent India's history. Thousands of law-abiding citizens who happened to be Sikhs were murdered most brutally by mobs supposedly acting out of spontaneous outrage at the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard. Several leading Congress politicians were among those named by witnesses (mainly Sikh women). It took years for First Information Reports to be filed, and years more for cases to be brought to trial. The procedure became subject to intrigue and manipulation, with several accused being let off on procedural grounds such as late filing of complaints. This despite the fact that judges were empowered to condone these delays in light of the trauma which these women had undergone.

Twelve commissions of inquiry into various aspects of this pogrom (euphemistically named 'November riots') have had their say – the latest is still at work. The first of these, the Ranganath Mishra Commission, severely indicted the police for deliberately omitting the names of influential persons while filing complaints, dropping serious allegations, and pursuing investigations in a perfunctory manner. Needless to say, all the senior politicians involved in these events have been acquitted. There have been a handful of convictions of less privileged individuals among the accused. Since there is no witness protection programme in India, the families of under-privileged victims of violence have no means of resisting intimidation. Some of these politicians have been re-admitted into the Congress Party and will doubtless be campaigning in the next elections in the name of secularism and national unity. Till date the Indian Parliament has not had the courage of conscience to pass a resolution condemning the mass murder of Indian citizens and condoling the surviving families. Our criminal justice system has enabled the guilty of 1984 to get away with mass murder.

On September 28, 1991, Shankar Guha Niyogi, beloved leader of the most influential autonomous workers' union in the country was murdered in his sleep. His was a non-violent movement popular with large numbers of contract labourers and miners, and irksome to the capitalists and liquor contractors of the area around the Bhilai Steel Plant. A dramatic trial resulted in the Trial Court convicting three prominent industrialists and their accomplices for murder – the first case of capitalists being jailed for killing a union activist. The Jabalpur High Court has since struck down the conviction. The case is in appeal before the Supreme Court.

In December 1992 the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya was destroyed in an act of mob frenzy, in culmination of a campaign for its 'removal' by the leaders of the main party in the current ruling dispensation, the BJP. Hundreds of citizens perished in the (certainly foreseeable) riots that followed all over the country, including Bombay. Leaders of the various organisations that participated in the event have since claimed and disclaimed responsibility depending on where and to whom they have spoken. The claims of logic and public morality have been subjected to verbal callisthenics bordering on artistry. The mosque was not really a mosque (we thought the whole point of the campaign was that Emperor Babar had erected a mosque upon the ruins of a demolished temple); it was a "disputed structure"; it had really become a temple in 1949 when idols miraculously appeared inside it (in which case the accused actually demolished a temple); it was not demolished at all, but blown up by a bomb, etc.

The criminal case against the forty-nine leaders of the BJP and its familial organisations has not yet been brought to trial, the framing of charges has been delayed for years, and the latest development is the suspension of charges against some of the (most distinguished) accused by the Lucknow High Court on account of a technicality. These persons include the Union Home Minister and the Union Human Resources Development Minister. The technicality is unlikely to be rectified as the state government is controlled by the BJP. Meanwhile, the Hindu priest looking after the idols in the "disputed structure" was allegedly murdered, and nothing much is remembered of him except that he had opposed the entire campaign. On April 30, 2000, Subhash Bhushan Sadh, an official from Uttar Pradesh, the state where the demolition took place, boarded a train carrying documents vital to the Ayodhya case. He was to deliver these to the Liberhan Commission inquiring into the events surrounding the demolition. As the train neared Delhi, the man was allegedly pushed out of the train, and told the police so in a dying declaration. He also revealed that his luggage contained important files. But the documents had mysteriously disappeared. I doubt that the truth of this episode will ever be known. I hope I am wrong, but I also doubt that the accused will ever face trial, let alone be punished.

In January 1996 a young female law student Priyadarshini Mattoo was raped and murdered in her flat. The accused was a fellow student

who had been stalking her for months. He also happened to be the son of an inspector-general of police. Written complaints had been filed against him, and Mattoo had been given police protection. The accused had been seen at the venue of the crime shortly before her murder. Despite the overwhelming evidence, (stalking, making threats over the phone, shouting at her in public), he was acquitted on December 3, 1999, because of a series of "lapses" by the prosecution. The judge noted the prosecution's attempts to weaken its own case. He faulted the Central Bureau of Investigation for not following procedure, for hiding evidence such as a fingerprint report, for fabricating evidence in favour of the accused. He speculated that "the CBI during trial knowingly acted in this manner to favour the accused." He recorded the attempt by the Delhi police "to assist the accused during investigation and also during trial... [Their doings] suggest that the rule of law is not meant for those who enforce the law nor for their near relatives." The judge came to the astounding conclusion that, "Though I know [the accused] is the man who committed the crime, I acquit him, giving him the benefit of doubt."

What a record for the police! A young woman goes to them for help, is raped and killed while under their protection, the main accused is the son of a senior policeman, and is acquitted. Another case of a young man killing a young woman in a fit of rage is in progress while I write – the Jessica Lal case. Those interested may observe the course of Indian justice – the young man and his associates have powerful connections, prosecution witnesses are turning hostile, and we may rest assured that some mystery will envelop the stark evidence. Who then killed Priyadarshini Mattoo? Did Jessica Lal drop dead of her own accord? Who knows? Who cares?

There are thousands of cases of miscarriages of justice in India. One may praise the honesty of the judge in the Mattoo case but lay citizens might well ask him – if he was convinced of the guilt of the accused, why did he acquit him? Without doubt there are magistrates and judges who perform their functions with commitment. However, in all good conscience I must ask my fellow citizens – are not judges part of society and susceptible to human failings? Are they not accountable before the Constitution and provisions of law? May not the citizenry criticise the decisions of the courts when these are found wanting in truth? I believe the courts are an institution larger than and not reducible to the persons occupying them. Is it not possible, then, hypothetically, that a judge too is

capable of contempt of court? And is it not true that dereliction of duty in law-enforcement agencies will contribute to anger, frustration and conflict in society? Is it really possible for the criminal justice system to effectively pursue a case wherein the Union Home Minister himself is a prime accused?

The structural defects are glaring – the low status and lack of autonomy of the offices of public prosecution, the absence of witness protection, and the susceptibility of police investigations to political interference are high on the list. India is undergoing massive transformations in economic orientation – these changes are already causing many disputes in matters of labour rights, protected tribal lands, shady deals and contracts. The poorer classes of Indians will have absolutely no recourse left if the courts fail them. If the system of justice does not improve drastically, we shall move further from any chances at social stability and reconciliation.

The Conditions of Reconciliation

In a brilliant novel entitled *The Reader* published in Germany six years ago, Bernhard Schlink tells a story of a teenage boy who has a secret love affair with a woman in her thirties, who disappears mysteriously, only to reappear in a court case for being a guard in an SS slave labour camp. She is tried for the murder of Jewish prisoners, and sentenced on the basis of a report for which she avowed the authorship. Only the protagonist knew she could not have written what she claimed, because only he knows the secret of her illiteracy. But he keeps silent. He sends her audio-taped books for the long years she is in prison, and over the years she learns to read. She makes a small bequest to a Jewish foundation in atonement for her role as a cog in the wheel of the Nazi system. In the end she commits suicide, the day before he was to bring her out into the normal world. *The Reader* leaves us wondering about the meaning of guilt, remorse, punishment and redemption.

Many of our favourite symbols and fables are attached to a grievance, either artificially or intrinsically. It would seem that the very act of self-definition conjures up injured innocence and righteous grief. How may we deal with this situation? The Papacy may indeed see fit to apologise to the ghost of Galileo five centuries after his incarceration, and to the Greek

Orthodox Church eight centuries after the sack of Byzantium. But how far can we go along this road? Who will apologise to whom for the Inquisition, colonialism, fascism and war? Ought we, on the other hand, to sit quiet when the current generation of Japanese children are taught that the Japanese occupation of East Asia in the 1930s was an act of altruism? That only Hindus suffered the loss and violence of Partition? That only Muslims were the perpetrators? What is the proper balance between remembering and forgetting?

Let me try and answer this. Reconciliation is neither the perpetual nurturing of grievance nor the cultivation of amnesia. It requires transcendence, which implies preservation as well as negation (as in rising above, leaving behind). It does not require us to be neurotic – rather it is the cure for collective neuroses and emotional indigestion. Nor does it deny that humans are nostalgic beings attached to their history. Reconciliation is a decision, based upon an acknowledgement of the truth as far as we may know it. (The 'final' truth of anything will always remain elusive, but may we not commit ourselves to searching for, experimenting with the truth?). It is also the repudiation of collective guilt – the descendants of racists are not responsible for racism. However, reconciliation cannot be based upon a denial or manipulation of the facts. May we claim, for example, that there was no such thing as the Holocaust, that the fire-bombing of Dresden and the atom-bombing of Hiroshima were simple military necessities? The last issue of *Time* magazine in 1999 summed up the history of the 20th century as a victory of "free minds and free markets over fascism and communism". Along with Clinton's essay in the same issue, it represented the Allied victory in World War II as an American one, completely ignoring the role of the Red Army and the life sacrifice of twenty million Soviet citizens, compared to less than 300,000 Americans. Is this kind of megalomania conducive to a reconciliation between peoples?

May we say that Stalinist purges and terror were a pure invention of the imperialists, that the Red Army committed no atrocities in Central Europe in 1944, that the US committed no war crimes during the Vietnam war, that the Pakistan Army never massacred civilians in Bangladesh, that the Indian Army has committed no atrocities in the North East and Kashmir, that China has an unblemished human rights record in Tibet (not to mention Tiananmen), that the RSS and its 'family' had no intention of destroying the Babri Mosque, that no temples were ever destroyed by

medieval Muslim rulers? May we insist that the UNO in 1948 gave Israel the right to forever expand its borders, create settlements and impede the emergence of a Palestinian state, that Hitler had the right idea about how to deal with "the semitic races"? (This is the opinion of the ideological forefathers of India's ruling party. Israeli citizens may not be aware that among their closest admirers in India are those who believe in Adolf's ideals and methods). May we claim all these things and still expect sweetness and light all round? Individuals are free to adopt such views but danger looms when they are incorporated into common sense. Historical knowledge has to be pursued with respect, balance and freedom from the fear of cultural and intellectual policing of whichever variety. This can only be done by treating both its fortunate and evil moments as part of a common heritage, by transcending the attachment to particularity that makes us deny the hateful things done by some of our ideological or ethnic ancestors

There can never be any peace and reconciliation without the adoption of non-violence on the part of the resisters and the acceptance (without resort to state terror), of the loss of privilege on the part of the powerful. Reconciliation is only possible between equals – equals in spirit if not substance. The very act of reconciliation elevates the dignity of the parties concerned, and establishes their basic humanity. But has the spirit of democracy truly pervaded the political ethos of the world? Until a few years ago the Prime Minister of Great Britain could scarcely conceal her sympathy for apartheid. Throughout the decades of the Cold War the western world treated racism as some kind of counterpoint to communism (our scoundrels vs theirs). The reigning US Supreme Court recently decided that the right to vote and be counted was less important than the fulfilment of formal procedures. Hierarchy and caste prejudice still overshadow the implementation of justice in India.

Until this fundamental illiberality is discarded by those who command power and substance in the modern world, there can be no reconciliation. *Is it not true that the very question of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission only arose after the acceptance of adult suffrage by the rulers of South Africa?* It is only when we recognise the dignity of our interlocutors that we may begin the psychic task of healing. Such recognition must be founded upon truth, for truth liberates. The great among us are those whom every effort to humiliate leaves unscarred. Their dignity is unimpeachable – they

are always equal in spirit, even when they are held in chains. Who can forget Nelson Mandela, who left behind 27 years of incarceration without a trace of bitterness in his soul?

Truth and Solitude

Human beings are fated to face some life crises solely as individuals. This is a commonplace. However, there are some whose solitude in extremis will reverberate through the centuries. Jesus Christ, we are told, was one such. His life work is historically unverifiable, but it is a moving and passionate story. And the truth of it still eludes us ("What is truth?" asked jesting Pilate, and would not wait for an answer). Gandhi was another solitary seeker after truth. The man known as the Mahatma had a premonition of his assassination, and made a lonely decision to face it without state protection, in order to deliver his final message. What must have passed through his mind when he saw a young man shoot him at point blank range? Generations will remember the loneliness of these singular individuals, as if to compensate them for the oversight of not sharing their agony when they needed solace as mere mortals. This posthumous respect is a leavening agent for the conscience of the living – to surround the sacrifice of a great soul with a crowd of memories becalms us somehow. Our collective remembrance enters the realm of public conscience, of the civic ethos and acts as a lever of restraint. And reconciliation. These were extraordinary human beings whose lives were antidotes to the rampaging disease of injustice on a monumental scale.

Let us remember too, the millions of ordinary heroes and heroines in the past century. I think of the soldiers of opposing armies who saved each other amidst the trenches of the Great War of 1914-18, a phenomenon then named fraternization. (With what gentle yet striking irony did nature mark the bloodshed by placing red poppies in the mud of battlefields!). History also reminds me of Russian women in the late 1940s who rebuilt a devastated country and wept at the rare sight of young men; the victims and survivors of the Holocaust; the thousands of men and women in India during Partition who retained their humanity when everyone around them was conscious only of community.

What of those whose solitude is not leavened, but exacerbated by time, whose pain is of no consequence because they were neither prophets nor

leaders, because they never left footprints on the sands of history? When all is said and done and I look back upon the violent century just gone by, I am burdened with the memory of a man whom posterity has rewarded with erasure, but whose sacrifice (when we bother to remember him), challenges us with profound and disturbing reflections. I do not know what practical lesson to draw from it. All I can do is pay homage to the unknown artisan named Johann Georg Elser whose monumental courage and love of humanity was and is enough to redeem the conscience of the German people, the honour of the German working class, and to contribute to the reconciliation of the German present with the German past.

(*For Elser's attempt to assassinate Hitler, refer to 'Remembering a True Antagonist' first published in the Pioneer on August 7, 1994 and included in this compilation.*)

In truth, Indians need justice and reconciliation to cross our bridges. How long shall we remain suspended in transition? When will Hindus and Muslims tire of stereotypical images of one another and perceive the ambivalent character of all human beings and cultures? When will our ritually 'pure' elite recognise caste prejudice as a barrier to social growth and human development? When will we stop murdering little girls in the womb and in infancy because the stupid masculinity of our great culture obscures the oneness of the human race? Let us strive for the finer balance, the balance between the need for acknowledgement and the need to transcend what has been acknowledged, between the requirements of social order and the necessity of human dignity, between the continuity of institutions and the urgency of transformation, between the anger of resistance and the compassion without which resistance only generates further oppression. It is that balance alone that may strengthen a feasible version of transitional justice. Justice is too important to be left to the judges. It is nothing less than a matter of human survival.

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The Enemy System

The cruel doctrine that guilt passes from one generation to the next must be abolished. If not, we risk transferring its burden to our children.

> "He (Pontius Pilate) took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying 'I am innocent of the blood of this man, see to it yourselves...
> And all the people answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children'!"
> – Bible, Mathew's Gospel

> "No law in the world punishes a son for the crime committed by his father. How can we justify the killing of a five-year old in Ahmedabad for a crime committed in Godhra?" – upper-caste shopkeeper in Ahmedabad.

The shopkeeper was wrong. For centuries, the Catholic Church (and its Protestant offshoots) did indeed justify the punishment of Jews for their mythical role in the murder of Jesus Christ. The myth originated in the Biblical accounts of the life of Jesus, and was perpetuated by Christianity's greatest intellects, including Paul, Aquinas, Martin Luther and Calvin, not to mention the Papacy. The story was that the Jews took upon themselves and all their children the onus of this crime. For centuries Jews were condemned as the devil's offspring, sensual, money-worshipers who deserved to be enslaved, their property confiscated, their synagogues burnt, their homes destroyed. They were to live separately, forbidden from owning land, from marrying Christians. They were held responsible for the Black Death in the 14th century, they were the special targets of the

Spanish Inquisition.

This tradition attained its apogee in the Nazi genocide of six million European Jews between 1941 and 1945. Significantly, in a conversation with senior Church functionaries in 1933, Hitler is reported to have assured them that "he will take no steps against the Jews that the Church has not taken in 1500 years". In the end, it was only a matter of degree, of elevating murder into an industry, that marked the difference between Nazism and the hoary traditions of Christian anti-Semitism. The thundering silence of Pope Pius XII in the 1940s, despite evidence of mass murder and repeated appeals by ordinary Catholics, Allied governments and Jewish organisations, was a logical outcome of this theologically ordained 'enemy system'.

It is equally significant that after the Russian Revolution, a section of the Church began to see a link between Judaism and Communism – Hitler's favorite theme. The man who acquired the informal title of being 'Hitler's Pope', is currently in the process of being made a saint. Meanwhile, the burden of Christianity's sins against the Jews has conveniently been transferred to the shoulders of Palestinians.

The cruel doctrine that guilt passes from one generation to the next has ancient lineage but is alive and well in modern India. It is the fulcrum of the worldview of our communalists. All Muslim citizens of independent India are supposedly responsible for the actions (real and imaginary) of Muslim rulers in the 16th century. They are also deemed to bear the guilt of Partition. The same logic was applied to justify the carnage of Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination, and in Bangladesh in 1993, where the Hindu population was blamed for the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Connected to the doctrine of collective guilt is the encouragement given to extra-legal punitive action. Mobs led by groups of well-organised hooligans 'punish' ordinary people whose guilt was established prior to their being born. Revenge and retaliation have been made instruments of state policy. Hence, our ultra-nationalist Lok Sabha could pay silent homage to the victims of 9/11 but cannot pass a condolence resolution for victims of communal violence in India.

How could this happen? Article 21 of the Constitution grants every Indian the right to life and liberty unless deprived of them by process of law. After the gruesome events in Godhra in February 2002, state officials in Gujarat withdrew these protections from a section of Indian citizens.

The entire Muslim community was held responsible for the actions of a few. The killing of innocents was justified on the grounds of collective guilt. Meanwhile, the VHP attacked the legislative assembly in Bhubaneshwar on March 16, confident of its links with the Union Government. Contemporary events have shown that a section of India's ruling establishment is tolerant of mob violence so long as it is directed at ordinary citizens and channelled along religious lines. Indeed, it mobilises and prepares such violence, while it criticises Naxalite violence for being mindless and anti-national. Senior retired bureaucrats and policemen have supported this endeavour, along with industrialists, wealthy NRIs and some religious leaders. The violence of the Bajrang Dal and VHP is 'nationalism', that of anyone outside the 'familial' ambit of the RSS is lawlessness and terror. This hypocrisy has been transformed into the common sense of our elite, for whom terrorism is a language spoken exclusively by Muslims.

All this is not a matter of the whims of demented persons. It is part of a systematic project to undermine constitutional democracy, which, for all its flaws, remains a major institutional resource for the working peoples struggle for a better life. The "enemy system", as described by John Mack, Harvard psychiatrist, is an instrument by which political leaders sustain popular hostility towards imagined adversaries as a means of maintaining power. It thrives on lies, intolerance and ignorance, the demonisation of other peoples, the surrender of personal responsibility to 'great men'. In extreme form, it appeals to the most destructive and exclusivist aspects of the human mind. And it glorifies brutality as a 'selfless' form of violence.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid was a foundation stone of the new political order being constructed by a section of India's ruling establishment. We are witness to an ongoing 'constitutional' coup d'etat. By acts of deliberate deception, (such as the arguments in favour of the VHP by the Attorney General and the acceptance of a 'sacred' brick in Ayodhya by an official), the government supported the fraudulent claim of the VHP to represent all Hindus. By so doing, the swayamsevaks in high office undermined the status of Parliament, which has been elected by millions of citizens, including a large proportion of Hindus. A parallel system of representation is being forced upon the Indian public.

What is the purpose of such a project? Nearly thirty crore Indians belong to families working in the informal sector of the economy. Savarna-capitalism uses a hierarchical caste structure, the constant

threat of corporal punishment, and oppressive customs to keep wages abysmally low, neglect social security systems, and undermine the social-democratic potential of modern state institutions. What we have in place of a duly regulated work-process, is an institutionalised Social Darwinism. Ultimately, it is political authority that regulates markets and wage relations and stabilises economic systems. Hence, governance must be examined for patterns of regularity. Why is there a gap between official regulations (regarding working conditions, minimum wages), and their implementation? Why is the status of 'citizen' effectively denied to millions of workers? Why does the zone of informality drain away the rights that arise from the zone of formality? Why do the reigning authorities periodically suspend the right of citizens to remain alive, by instigating mass murder in the guise of communal or caste 'riots', for whose duration the police apparatus is suspended and the judicial conscience stricken by amnesia? Is it not true that their main victims are the labouring poor and self-employed artisans?

Communal and caste violence has become the preferred mode of governance of the Indian ruling classes, the mode by which they have negotiated their discomforts with democracy. The periodic outbreaks of mass murder that we call 'riots' can no longer be explained away as unfortunate tangents in an otherwise steady course of India's development. They are the very face of Indian modernity. Unless we abolish the enemy system, we will transfer its burden to our children. And that will be a crime which will not wash easily.

Published on the tenth anniversary of the Babri Mosque demolition

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Venue for a Speech on *Tamas* – A Chronicle of an Event That Should Never Have Happened

How Bhisham Sahni's visit to a college in Delhi University was transformed into an anti-communal statement

Early in the year of grace 1988 certain (dis)reputable members of the academic community in the University of Delhi organised a public address on an unspeakable subject by a reluctant speaker in an unlikely location. Your chronicler was one of those persons. Our repute – or notoriety, depending on ideological taste – was on account of our strident criticism of the politics of Hindutva, at the time a popular philosophy within the teaching community. (It probably still is, although the hopes of its votaries have been somewhat dimmed by the course of events). The address was part of a meeting to discuss the controversial TV serial *Tamas*, whose storyline suggested to some minds that the Partition of India had been sparked by actions of Hindus. Its advent on the household screen had enraged the sensibilities of Hindutva's hegemons. So severe was their ire that the Hyderabad centre of Doordarshan had been ransacked by the local wing of the BJP in protest and as a token of what could be expected to happen if it continued to be telecast. In our opinion however, *Tamas* was a balanced and sincere fictionalised portrayal of the dangerous and inhuman consequences of communal politics of whichever hue. The star speaker at our meeting was none other than the author of the script and the venue was the auditorium of Ramjas College. What transpired on that fateful day became an object lesson in the art of intimidation, the politics of speech and the (potential) strength of conviction.

The episode had its origins in the decision by the students' wing of the Hindu nationalists to invite me to participate in a panel discussion of the serial being organised by the university student's union, then under their control. I was approached by the unions' emissaries during the course of a lecture by two visiting Pakistani civil rights activists (ironical, but true), and told them that a far better choice of speaker would be my comrade and colleague, Purushottam Agrawal, who was then employed as a teacher of medieval poetry in the Hindi department of the college. This was agreed upon, and we were duly informed of the date and venue. A week later, on the appointed day we saw posters advertising the seminar at Tagore Hall with a list of names which contained four speakers of known saffron persuasion (known colloquially as *shakha mrigs*) and two (pseudo)-secularists (to use L.K. Advani's quaint and ironic semantic invention) one of whom, Rajendra Mathur of the Hindi daily *Navbharat Times* subsequently revealed to us that he had no information about the panel discussion and that his name had been announced without his consent.

On the lawn outside the hall and in the company of several students who had come there specifically to hear Purushottam, the latter made clear his anger and irritation at the organisers for having misled us about the nature of the panel, which we had been led to understand was going to be `balanced'. He was inclined at first to boycott the proceedings and deny the event the aura of a democratic debate, so dearly sought after by its organisers. After considering our options, our little group decided that this was an opportunity not to be wasted. Purushottam was the first speaker and his speech delivered extempore, was the most scintillating polemic against so-called Hindu nationalism that I have ever heard. Drawing upon his knowledge of classical bhakti as well as modern literature and with rhetorical flourishes embellished by his political sense regarding the dangers of incipient fascism, he spent over forty minutes demolishing the arguments and actions of the opponents of the serial.

Towards the middle of his oration, the organisers and the rest of the panelists (which included a notorious politician from East Delhi) were looking decidedly sheepish, but it is a measure of the power of his words that he held his largely hostile audience spellbound. As our small group sipped tea and chatted in the lawns of the Law Faculty in the aftermath of the meeting, Ram Prakash Tripathi, a Ramjas Hindi honours student, suggested that we invite the author of *Tamas* to the university. Ved

Prakash, another of Purushottam's students, enthusiastically supported the idea. We soon convinced ourselves that this was the best way to counter the hysteria being so assiduously built up about the serial. And what better place to invite him to than our own college? A date in early February was tentatively decided upon and arrangements made to invite Bhisham Sahni along with Dewan Birendranath, the well-known Urdu literateur and a stalwart of the anti-communal movement.

One morning, some days before our big event, I arrived at the college to find Ram Prakash standing at the gate holding a stick with an inverted *ghara* (earthen pot) with a gruesome face painted on it. A placard indicated that the face represented "communal forces". Ram was an ebullient soul, once a convinced Hindu nationalist, and by his second year equally convinced of the need to combat communalism. His detractors held Purushottam's influence to be totally responsible for this metamorphosis and I think Ram would agree with this assessment. "What are you up to, Ram?" I asked, somewhat redundantly since it was clear as daylight what he was up to. *"Ab bahut ho gaya hai sirr!* (It has gone too far, sir)", he replied enthusiastically, informing me that he had decided to wait no longer before starting a counter campaign in support of *Tamas*. His presence at the spot was the start, he told me, of a student demonstration which he had organised. An hour or so later he could be seen among a noisy group of about seven or eight of his friends, moving about the campus. One of them held aloft the aforementioned hideous dummy, while the others waved posters with slogans such as "Communalism, Down Down", and *"Tamas serial aya hai, Phirkaparast ghabraya hai* (the *Tamas* serial has unnerved the communalists)". Most observers of this demonstration did not seem impressed by anything but the hiatus between its size and the disproportionate amount of noise emanating from it.

Our plans to hold the meeting in Ramjas College were not exactly progressing without let or hindrance. The college principal, who had initially expressed support for the idea, began having qualms after the university students' union sent emissaries to warn him of dire consequences should Bhisham Sahni have the temerity to visit the campus. There were rumours that they planned to ransack the college – *eent se eent baja denge* (we will destroy it brick by brick) – was the colourful threat being circulated. Teachers of saffron persuasion were extremely annoyed, and we received more than our usual quota of black looks that

week. However, both venerable gentlemen, Sahni and Birendranath, had consented to attend and left-wing student organisations on campus were enthused. Suddenly a highly visible campaign emerged to mobilise a massive attendance for the meeting. The college union president – an ideologically innocent young man – was bothered more by the threat of being eclipsed by the event than by its political import. He was happy that we asked him to deliver a welcome address.

The night before the big day, I received a phone call at home from the station-house officer of the police station directly concerned with the security for the function. Now, Ramjas College was never known for its pacific atmosphere. It had seen so much turbulence that its denizens were used to making jocular suggestions that a special police station be set up outside its gates. Owing to the fact that I had been embroiled in police cases by certain affectionate members of the college administration and over the years had had occasion to intervene in several affrays which ended with the need to visit the thana either to bail out students or lodge complaints, I was familiar with local police officials. This had not prepared me however, for late-night chats with officers of peace. This one addressed me with great chumminess.

"Seem'n saab!", he exclaimed, "we hear that Bhisham Sahni is coming to your college tomorrow?".

"Indeed", I replied, "what a pleasure to hear from you, and you hear correctly".

"Can't you postpone the function somehow?".

"No, I can't, everything has been arranged, you have been duly informed, invitations have been despatched.

But why do you ask?"

"Our information is that the opposite party is planning violent disruption – on the lines of what happened in Hyderabad".

The prospect of having to face the wrath of the entire local wing of the Hindutva-vadis was quite alarming, but I put a brave front on it.

"Our information, to the contrary, is that they will not risk it – since they know they will fail to cause any disruption".

The conversation dragged on for some minutes, with the policemen importuning me to call the whole thing off insisting that it was too dangerous. Finally, I had to tell him rather tersely that the holding of public meetings was a democratic right of the citizenry, and that I was

not about to agree to his request. In any case, I said, after listening to one last warning (this was beginning to sound more like a threat), I thought to myself, with upright policemen like him to protect us we had nothing to fear from potential disrupters. He then suggested I use my `mobilising' ability to arrange a demonstration in support of Kiran Bedi, at the time the target of protests by lawyers, one of whom had recently been arrested and handcuffed after being caught red-handed stealing underwear from the St Stephen's College ladies' room. While I was convinced that in this case the lawyers' agitation was unjustified, I was amused that he found it possible to ask me to `organise the masses' on behalf of the police. Begging his pardon for being unable to do as he asked, I put down the receiver and went to bed.

Early next morning I had another phone call, this time from my esteemed friend Dewan Birendranath, who had agreed to preside over the meeting. "Dilip!" he said, with a slight hint of concern in his voice, "are you expecting any trouble today?". Wait, I replied the SHO has been speaking with you, has he not? The conscientious officer had spent a deal of time trying to convince Dewan sahib that the meeting was doomed to end in a fracas. (Fortunately, Purushottam did not possess a telephone connection at the time). Luckily, Dewan was a man of considerable courage. I managed soon enough to persuade him that we ought under no sort of threat to cancel our programme if we were at all serious about combatting the vicious propaganda being put out about *Tamas* and Bhisham Sahni. "Let them do their worst!", he said cheerfully, "We shall face it! I'll be there". I got ready and rode my motorcycle to college.

Arriving at Ramjas well before ten (the scheduled time of the meeting), I found Purushottam with Ved, Ram and a couple of others walking up and down on the front lawns, consternation writ large on their faces. *"Mitravar! Ek vikat sthiti paida ho gayee hai* (Friend, we are confronted with a terrible situation)". I was alarmed. He didn't use such language without good reason. And good reason there was. Bhisham Sahni had suddenly, that very morning, changed his mind about addressing our meeting. The charming SHO had won a victory and scared off the one person who mattered most. I was thunderstruck. What were we to do now? The college auditorium was already full. If the star speaker absented himself, not only would we all experience the ignominy of retreat, but the cause to which our status among the students was firmly attached, that of combatting

communalism and defending the serial, would suffer a tremendous body-blow.

The situation was clearly intolerable, and a remedy would have to be found immediately. We made an emergency decision to go personally to Sahni's home in Patel Nagar and appeal to him to change his mind once more. Purushottam, your narrator, and Manmohan Singh of the Students' Federation of India hastily got into a taxi outside the college and made off. On the way we spoke to the driver, mainly to apprise him of the extreme urgency of the situation and urge him to step on the accelerator. He turned out to be a Muslim, quite anxious about what might happen to him and his vehicle were he to attract the tender attention of a certain group of `patriots' whom he had heard were due to descend upon the college.

The literateur greeted the taxi-load of (pseudo)-secularists with surprise. Clad in a long brown Kashmiri *phiran*, he looked the picture of firm resolve. None of our fervent appeals appeared to move him. Do you know how much trouble it has been to get this telecast? he asked us. What a great waste it will all have been if the government uses a fracas in your college as a pretext to cancel it. Quite true, we agreed, but there will not be a fracas. How can you be sure? asked his wife, we have heard that Ramjas is a *garh* (bastion) of the Hindutva brigade. No, no, we assured them – it used to be, but no longer is – we have fought them to a standstill. The hall is full, Bhishamji, the entire college, the university, is waiting for you. Please do not desert us now! And so, it went on for several minutes. The great man would not budge.

The young comrade with us waxed eloquent about the hordes of students who would die rather than allow a hair of the writer to be touched. Purushottam announced dramatically that he had never done this before but was going to fall at Bhishamji's feet to implore him to attend. Before he actually did this, we appealed directly to Mrs Sahni, assuring her that there was no question of any physical danger to her husband. This was a moment of truth – we were desperate, and the lady must have sensed our desperation. None of those present had any personal axe to grind, all of us were there only on account of a deeply felt political – and indeed sentimental – attachment to something much larger than any selfish interest. Mrs Sahni must have discerned our sincerity and understood the confluence between our ideals and those which had inspired Bhishamji to write *Tamas* in the first place. Her face softened and appeared to relent.

Suddenly the stalemate ended as, in a moving gesture, she announced that she would advise him to go provided she could accompany us. Perhaps she was still apprehensive about his safety – who knows what the guardians of the law had told him? Perhaps she was simply trying to ensure that whatever the danger he might face, she would be there to share it with him. If courage indeed be defined as grace under pressure, Mrs Sahni demonstrated a fierce courage that morning, as with that one gesture, she incorporated us into her family, and informed us, not verbally, but by physical presence that henceforth we were responsible for whatever happened. Breathing sighs of relief, we bundled the couple into the taxi and made off as fast as the driver could manage.

The writer's anxious moments had not ended – in fact, he was still not sure that he was not walking into a minefield. As we turned the last corner and approached the gate, we heard loud shouts of *hai hai, hosh mein aao* (shame, shame, come to your senses) and *murdabad* (down, down) emanating from the vicinity of the college office, which was located at one end of the building. Sahniji assumed, understandably, that the hostile slogans were directed at him. He turned on us. "See! they are shouting at us! There is bound to be trouble!". For a split-second I too imagined an angry demonstration set up by disgruntled *shakha-mrigs* (saffronites). Veteran Ramjas-ites are familiar with the feeling of deep dismay which overcomes the individual who is part of an ongoing struggle when he or she has to face yet another confrontation with its barely suppressed violent undertones. In that passing instant I think all of us realised the magnitude of what we had undertaken. Bhisham Sahni had become a household name in the country. Despite our admiration for him, we were in no doubt that there were many among his detractors who would have been happy to see him beaten up and publicly humiliated. The slogans stirred us out of the euphoria and relief we had experienced upon getting the couple into the taxi. We woke up but felt relieved yet again when we realised that the slogans were part of a normal run-of-the-mill Ramjas College anti-principal demonstration. This one was being staged by hostel students angry about mess bills and the like. It was all quite ordinary and we said as much, but for a few seconds our guests were convinced that nothing short of physical dismemberment awaited them.

The scene changed rapidly. The minute our taxi entered the iron gates, a crowd of student activists including Ravi Kant, Arun and many others,

relief writ large on their faces, surrounded us even as we opened the doors. Shouts of Bhisham Sahni zindabad and inquilab zindabad rent the air as the man was hoisted on friendly shoulders and carried all the way into the college porch and thence through crowded aisles into a jam-packed auditorium. The hall must have had thrice as many occupants as its capacity of seven hundred. The scene inside was unbelievably boisterous and defiant. Tall and surly plainclothes policemen stood with barely concealed firearms on the dais, where Dewan Birendranath was waiting. Our senior colleague GB Upreti welcomed the guest as the principal hovered around looking busy and anxious. (As he had every reason to be). Students whooped, cheered and whistled with delight just to see the famous author. The irrepressible Ram and Ved had organised a gang of their own to persist with their favourite *Phirkaparast ghabraya hai* slogans. Some groups almost sang the slogan *Sampradayikta pe hulla bol* (Raise your voice against communalism), while others announced the imminent advent of the Revolution. Bhisham Sahni was wished a very long life and communalism was `downed' once and for all. The hall reverberated with slogans for several minutes during which it looked as if its false ceiling might collapse. I was amazed and moved to see the outpouring of vibrant emotion with which the frail figure responsible for authoring *Tamas* was greeted.

The dramatic oscillation of euphoria and tension had not ended however, and we experienced several fearful minutes when certain faction leaders of the college student's union began a very noisy and violent argument among themselves about who would have the honour of delivering a welcome address. Since all this took place on stage and in close proximity to Sahniji, we had good reason to fear for his safety. Not many teachers had bothered to come, and I was glad for the re-assuring presence of my colleagues Upreti sahib (who sat on the edge of the stage right through the proceedings to ward off potential trouble-makers), Sudhakar, Pralay and Salim, all of whom were there out of a sense of solidarity. At the moment when the squabble erupted however, we would have been at the mercy of the police but for the presence of mind and complete selflessness of Suman Kesri, Kamala, Shubhra Pande and a small group of women led by them who formed a human cordon around our guests. That Suman was several months pregnant made her actions that much more significant. In a way, the gesture of the women manifested the

palpable sense of community that pervaded the Ramjas auditorium that morning. All of us, the ones who had organised the event as well as most of the audience were united in our desire that it take place peacefully and that Bhisham Sahni and Mrs Sahni return home absolutely safe. When the women formed their cordon, they expressed a quiet determination which was not lost on everyone who saw it. No attempt to harm our guests could have taken place without meeting with immediate physical resistance. From that moment the police became redundant, and the rhetorical question which Dewan Birendranath was to pose a few minutes later had been answered before it was asked.

The meeting got underway. Dewan sahib took the chair and the college principal and union president spoke their welcome. Purushottam and me made brief speeches. By this time Dewan was carried away by the sheer drama and passion of the moment. Standing next to the podium with one arm akimbo and the other held aloft, he wagged his finger at his political adversaries and announced that henceforth Indian citizens would have to wage a prolonged battle to rid the country of the politics of hatred. "We shall see if this is Gandhi's or Godse's India!", he bellowed into the mike, as the crowd cheered his fighting speech. The star of the occasion, Bhisham Sahni was the last speaker and the applause which greeted his few steps to the podium was deafening. All his anxiety seemed to have evaporated in the company of so many fervent well-wishers. He described the tremendous struggle which had to be waged to obtain approval for the serial to be telecast.

Referring to the controversy it had sparked off among the Hindu Nationalists, he remarked on the absence in his script of a direct mention of any organisation by name. "If someone recognises his image in the serial, he had better search his conscience", he advised. I noticed that the front ranks of seats were occupied by all the top brass of the university student's union. For all the bloodcurdling threats with which they had sought to sabotage the meeting, they were well-behaved, with bland countenances. Given the presence of the police and the fact that they were heavily outnumbered, their placid conduct was probably a case of discretion being the better part of valour. Soon after the meeting concluded, the university union president congratulated Purushottam and me, wearing a smile which barely concealed his detestation. The meeting had been a grand success. As the chief guests were escorted home and the last slogans died

away, our assorted gang of organisers gathered to celebrate.

The *Tamas* meeting was (till then and without exaggeration) the single most significant public gathering in Delhi university, if not the city of Delhi in recent memory. It was definitely the most vibrant and inspired gathering within a walled space that I have had the privilege to witness. The police did their job well – after doing their best to scuttle the event (in which they very nearly succeeded), they turned up in strength to prevent what is known in bureaucratic parlance and among official newsreaders as "an untoward incident". For their part, the Hindutva brigade did what they know best. They tried to achieve their ends by intimidation and having failed, quenched their anger by painting vicious slogans all over the college walls overnight. For all of us leftists and unabashed (pseudo)-secularists who by the late 1980s were beginning to wonder where our fighting spirit had gone to, the meeting signified the rejuvenation of faltering hopes and aspirations. It was our way of standing up, defying communal politics and saying, "We're not dead yet!". And despite all that has happened since then, not least of it the passage of my respected friend Dewan Birendranath (may he rest in peace) and the destruction of Babri Masjid, that day still energises me as I know it must invigorate most of those who attended it. We weren't finished then. And we aren't finished now.

(NB: This is a personal account of a public event and doubtless may appear incomplete to many who witnessed it. The author asks the pardon of all those who helped organise it and have not been mentioned in this narrative due to lapses in memory).

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COMMUNALISM COMBAT, JANUARY 2003

Out of the Shadow

Despite the existence within the major world religions of pacifist and democratic currents, they have thus far proven incapable of developing a civilisational ethic of non-violence.

The *Great War and Modern Memory*, by Paul Fussell, is one of the most profound books of the twentieth century. Written in 1975, it reviews the literature and sensibilities produced by the First World War, that cost nearly 20 million lives. It tells us urgent truths about modernity's obsession with territorial boundaries, enemies and 'selfless' violence. One chapter covers life in the trenches – which covered a combined distance of 25,000 miles, three times the earth's circumference – on the German French border. By 1916, soldiers had lost all hope of winning, and there were groups in the English trenches that called themselves the Never-endians. The Great War ended in 1918, but the rise of fascism, the colonial wars of the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Korean war, the Vietnam war, wars over Palestine, wars in South Asia and Africa, the recent wars in the Balkans and the Gulf, the war the US and UK are keen to unleash on Iraq, not to mention the insurgencies rampaging throughout the globe, are evidence that the Never-endians were right.

According to one estimate, the past century experienced (conservatively) 250 wars and 110 million deaths related to battles and ethnic conflicts. The Second World War cost 55 million lives, and the last decade and a half has seen some 30 million deaths. An increasing proportion of these losses have taken place among civilians. During the course of modern history, war has changed from being a strategic, military

principle – the fare of martial experts – to becoming part of the inmost fabric of civil society. War has vacated its position at the nation-state's outer periphery, where it supposedly protected the nation against external foes, and has migrated inward, culminating in perpetual civil war, an "internal colonialism", enacted to control, eventually to eliminate the inner social enemy, or the 'other'.

What has this to do with the situation in India and South Asia? The central feature of a democratically run constitutional state is the existence of institutional mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of social conflict. The Indian state has always claimed to be such a state, and often (in the past) with good reason. The electoral system has functioned, on the whole with reasonable efficiency, and major governmental changes at the provincial and central levels have been brought about without recourse to dictatorship and military rule. Territorial and resource-related disputes between provinces have been resolved without warfare. However, over the decades public institutions such as the police and the criminal justice system, the electoral process, the legislatures, urban municipalities and centres of higher education have degenerated critically. The common element in this degeneration is the growth of violence and intimidation for the protection of vested interests, the criminalisation of politics and governance.

Symptoms of Breakdown

For the most part, this has been the effect as well as the symptom of right-wing extremism hiding behind the mask of religion and identity (of all hues). Sections of the Left have indulged in 'revolutionary violence', that has sometimes led to the deaths of the very proletariat whose cause they espouse. Moderate centrist parties patronise *goondas* and criminal elements for use during elections and in manipulated rioting such as the carnage of Sikhs in November 1984. Private armies and paramilitary organisations have mushroomed over the past two decades, out of reach of the law. Mafia-style networks extract protection money, foment ethnic and communal hatred and may even acquire state power – the Shiv Sena being an outstanding example. Certain student and youth organisations take avowedly violent postures. At election-time the sale of illegal weapons goes up, numbers of criminals are mysteriously released

from jail, arrangements made for the forcible capture of polling-booths, and persons with criminal pasts obtain party tickets – many of them actually become legislators. Laws meant to control hate-speech (such as Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code) are never enforced against communal agitators, thus encouraging them to expand their activities. In certain parts of the countryside, powerful landed interests maintain private paramilitary 'senas' that conduct massacres in areas where poor peasants tend to resist oppression. The Ranvir Sena in Bihar maintains a paid cadre who get benefits upon injury. Rarely has the state ever taken action against it. Apart from the political arena, violence against women, exemplified in rape and dowry deaths is showing no signs of abating.

In November 1984, there took place one of the most shameful events in independent India's history. Thousands of law-abiding citizens who happened to be Sikhs were brutally murdered by mobs supposedly acting out of 'spontaneous' outrage at the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Several leading Congress politicians were among those named by witnesses (mainly Sikh women). It took years for First Information Reports to be filed, and years more for cases to be brought to trial. The procedure became subject to manipulation, with several accused being let off on procedural grounds such as late filing of complaints, (although the judges were empowered to condone these delays). Twelve commissions of inquiry into this pogrom (euphemistically named 'November riots') have had their say – the latest is still at work.

The first of these, the Ranganath Mishra Commission, severely indicted the police for omitting the names of influential persons while filing complaints, dropping serious allegations, and pursuing investigations in a perfunctory manner. Since there is no witness protection programme in India, the families of under-privileged victims of violence have no means of resisting intimidation. There have been a few convictions of socially under-privileged individuals. All senior politicians accused of involvement in the events have been acquitted. Some of them have been re-admitted into the Congress Party and will doubtless be campaigning in the next elections in the name of secularism and national unity. Till date the Indian Parliament has not had the courage of conscience to pass a resolution condemning the carnage of Indian citizens and condoling the surviving families. Our criminal justice system has enabled the guilty of 1984 to get away with mass murder. There is no doubt that the same fate awaits criminal trials

arising out of the recent carnage in Gujarat.

Posing the Question

The word violence is a misnomer – we are now confronted by brutality and cruelty unimaginable in scale and intensity. Most modern political currents, from the extreme Left to the radical Right, with many moderates in-between, treat this phenomenon uncritically, and 'tactically'. Moreover, the mistake is often made of focusing only on the identification of culprits. Political commentators (and party spokespersons), tend to speak of these events as if it were merely a
matter of crimes committed by the Congress in 1984, or the BJP-VHP in 2002, etc. This attitude 'politicises' endemic violence to the point of obfuscation – it fails to address its root causes, its flows and socio-economic functions. It also wishes away the stark reality that a fearful and terrified public is the most volatile basis for the construction of a fascist constituency. If violence and the growth of violent ideologies are fast becoming the means for the fascist reconstruction of the Indian state, it is incumbent upon the democratic public to confront the matter explicitly.

Why is there so much agreement amongst rivals on such a burning issue? I submit that violence is rapidly acquiring an autonomous position in the modern world, and that treating it as a tactic will add fuel to the flames. Can we argue that World War II, the Nazi genocide of six million European Jews and the explosion of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki have left the question of violence at the same uncomplicated place that it was at the beginning of the twentieth century? Violence has been 'democratised' to the point where all civilians are considered targets, where the very distinction between civilians and combatants has been abolished. The century that invented the term 'exterminism' has left us with the fearful task of re-examining the crisis of modernity, of re-stating the political platform of social democracy.

Civil war in South Asia has been unfolding for more than half a century. The partition of India was an escalation of communal civil war to geopolitical dimensions. Sri Lanka is yet to extricate itself from civil war, brought on in the main by the explicitly sectarian politics practiced by its political establishment. The process has given rise to one of the most vicious identity formations in the world, the Tamil Tigers, who (apart

from their use of children as soldiers), have systematically annihilated all moderate, democratically minded Tamil intellectuals. Sri Lanka now faces the prospect of a bargain that will enable the Tigers to implement their totalitarian programme.

Nepal has recently plunged into civil war, a process for which the corrupt and authoritarian Nepali monarchical elite is squarely to blame. It is unlikely that the current international defenders of 'freedom' will allow Nepal to become a democratic republic – the task is rendered more difficult because of the violent methods adopted by the Maoist opposition. Pakistan underwent civil war in 1971, and the Pakistani Army has proven itself to be most courageous while massacring civilians and overthrowing its own governments. A combination of US-inspired cold war strategy and the communalism that underlay Pakistan's creation has enabled the growth of *jehadi* tendencies and a fragmented polity. Given their fundamentally sectarian outlook, the Pakistani establishment's support for Kashmiri insurgency has inevitably infused it with communal ideology – the victims of this are not only the tens of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits who have been forced to migrate, but also Kashmiri Muslims, especially Muslim women. Bangladesh has seen the resurgence of extreme right-wing political elements that subsist on communal hatred and India-baiting – the latest example of this being the organised attacks on Bangladeshi Hindus (perceived as being Awami League voters) after the last general election.

In India, a fascist project of 'unifying society' by means of sustained hate-speech, communally inspired education and manipulated violence has been operative for decades. Its object is to undermine the Indian Constitution and forestall social democracy. Parts of independent India have been under armed occupation for 50 years. Given the lakhs of people killed in 1947-48, the wars over Kashmir and Bangladesh, the tens of thousands killed in massacres in 1969, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1990, 19923, 2002 etc., it would appear that this elite-inspired civil war is still unfolding. In the process, the criminal justice system is becoming defunct, and informal armies dispensing informal 'justice' are operating with impunity. In the light of these developments, I suggest that the following propositions be closely examined:

- Violence generates an autonomous dynamic, that (potentially) transcends politics.
- It is the grammar of economic exploitation, social oppression and

gender discrimination.
- The more that any democratic resistance uses violence, the further it strays from social liberation.
- The organisation of violence generates despotism and authoritarianism.
- Religion-based nationalism and identity politics are the breeding grounds of tyranny.

The dynamism associated with violence derives from an unending spiral of revenge and irrationality and is sustained by the patriarchal values of 'virility', honour and shame. Its generator is the binary logic of 'otherness', through which all forms of brutality become justified by reference to chronological sequence, as in the phrase: *"they started it"*. Because of this, violence tends to distort the ordinary sense of time and sequence, cause and effect – Palestinians and Israelis, for example, are suspended in such a spiral.

Any serious social-democratic programme has squarely to address the question of violence, and place on its agenda society's determination to liberate itself from fear and brutality. Because violence is both the expression and the symptom of social degeneration and political crisis, placing it at the centre of a regional democratic agenda will generate a highly overdue social debate about the roots, forms and functions of violence. Questions of the iniquitous relations between the sexes, between social castes and classes, and the structured violence of the global polity, will inevitably acquire a fresh charge. The relationship between democratic institutions, and the military-industrial complex; between arms-dealers and insurgents; between violence in the family and in society at large, will come under social scrutiny. The sooner this debate is generalised on a South Asian, and not merely Indian plane, the more fruitful will it be for democrats in all countries in the region.

The Challenge for Believers

Religious concepts have of necessity to engage with universal values such as the human being and human life. But insofar as religion becomes associated with assertions of identity and power, a tension develops between the implicit universality of religious philosophy and the ethical requirements of pragmatism – viz., the notion that the end justifies the

means. This is the beginning of moral chaos and leads to the philosophical denaturing of theology. An accretion of values unfolds that is directly linked to the new political function ascribed to religion. Religion is admirably suited to co-option within the instrumental rationality of advanced capitalism. It takes the appearance of an antidote to the spiritless secularism of the money economy, but in fact becomes useful as a technique of mass control.

The more religion assumes the role of an insignia of political identity, the further it moves away from its ethical function. The dubious role of the Catholic Church with its pathological anti-semitism in the Spanish Civil War, the European crisis of the 1930s and in the career of Nazism; the implication of American Baptists and the Dutch Reformed Church in the racist politics of the American deep south and South Africa respectively; the stranglehold of expansionist Zionism over Judaism after the Second World War; the prolonged degeneration of the fundamentalist current in Islam to the point that it has reached with the Taliban and Al Qaeda; the ease with which the violent right-wing in India has been able to assume the mask of Hindu resurgence; the transformation of the Akalis from their origins as an anti-imperialist and reformist movement of Sikhs into a communal political vector; the involvement of Buddhist clergy in anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka over the past decades – all this points to an alarming fact. Despite the existence within the major world religions of pacifist and democratic currents, they have thus far proven incapable of developing a civilisational ethic of non-violence. The result is that *all religions are today in an advanced stage of ethical decomposition. The crux of the matter turns upon the question of violence and the doctrine of collective guilt*. I do not wish to condemn all religious belief, nor tar all religions with the same rough brush, but merely place before the believers the challenge of transforming their spirituality into a power for non-violence, justice and social transformation.

Gujarat and After

In the aftermath of the heinous arson attack on the Sabarmati Express at Godhra in February 2002, the entire Muslim community of Gujarat was held responsible and punished for a crime committed by a handful of people. Many independent observers have testified that the state

government bestowed its protection upon gangs that organised brutal killings and rape of innocent women, men and children. The police were neutralised by orders from elected authorities who had sworn to protect the Constitution. During the recent election campaign, hate mongering was the order of the day, with the chief minister referring to refugee camps as "child-producing factories". Persons seen to have instigated and participated in mob-violence were made candidates and have been elected. *Revenge, retaliation and mass violence were made instruments of state policy.*

Some of India's leading politicians have justified these enormities via the heinous concept of collective guilt, the doctrinal basis for the Nazi genocide of six million European Jews. Not merely Narendra Modi and his henchmen, but Prime Minister Vajpayee too, have repeatedly referred to Godhra as justification for the organised pogrom that followed. They have also repeated the lie that Muslim organisations did not condemn Godhra, implying that this was a good reason for the murder of innocent persons. Their explanations completely ignore the crucial difference between a locally executed crime and crimes sponsored and committed by groups enjoying government protection. *Clearly, high officials of the Indian polity believe that mass murder is understandable and acceptable in certain circumstances.* In this matter Vajpayee is in the exalted company of the late Rajiv Gandhi, who famously declared (speaking of the carnage of Sikhs after Indira Gandhi's assassination) that the felling of a great tree was bound to cause the earth to tremble.

The events in Gujarat from March 2002 onwards demonstrate that a section of the Indian ruling establishment is undermining the Indian Union and the Constitution. It includes political leaders, gazetted officials and extra-constitutional centres of power such as the RSS and its fronts. This section enjoys the support of retired police officers (a former inspector general of the Uttar Pradesh police, a former director of the CBI are two examples among many), major industrialists, and wealthy NRIs from the hard currency zone. Uncomfortable with the social-democratic potential of the constitutional polity, this section has launched what may be described as a surreptitious coup d'etat. This is to be achieved by a mixture of violence, communal propaganda and tactical participation in democratic processes. In stark terms:

- The Indian Constitution is being deliberately undermined by those

sworn to protect it.
- Democracy is being misused to negate constitutional rights and destroy democratic institutions.
- Extra-legal mob violence enjoys the tacit or open support of high state officials.
- The culture of violence and bloodshed is being propagated ideologically as a 'nationalist' virtue.
- Civil society in India is being rapidly converted into a warzone.

What is striking about the reactions of government leaders is the complete absence of any human compassion in their statements. Barring the President, not once did any high executive of state betray any sympathy for the plight of miserable humanity rotting in refugee camps in their own cities. All they were bothered about was their 'image', which they equate with the 'image' of India. The brutalisation of human conscience is the most tragic outcome of the politics of violence being practised in India today.

Beyond Violence

As we struggle to comprehend the dire predicament of Indian democracy, let us focus on the wellsprings of violence in the everyday life of the Indian people. Nearly three hundred million Indians belong to families working in the informal sector of the economy, among whom women and children are the most downtrodden. India's *savarna*-capitalism uses caste stigma, stern patriarchal norms, constantly applied physical punishment and oppressive customs to keep wages abysmally low, ignore social security, feed hordes of contractors and middlemen, and effectively deny millions of Indians the benefits of modern citizenship. Instead of a regulated work-process, the ruling classes are busy consolidating an institutionalised Social Darwinism.

The ideology of the RSS and its fronts is the most adequate doctrine for the success of this scheme. This is because of the central importance it places on the inculcation of violence – as sentiment, preparation and practice. Their worldview is simple: Hindus are too pacific; Muslims, Christians and communists are 'foreign inspired', we must teach them a lesson by beating and killing them whenever occasions arise. They have worked hard to propagate this outlook, and for various reasons

(contributed to by the opportunism of certain moderate centrists and leftists), they have become the main political vehicle for the authoritarian transformation of the Indian state. The victims of their march to totalitarian power will be (as always) the labouring poor and self-employed artisans. *Sporadically organised communal and caste violence is the preferred mode of governance of the Indian ruling class*. It is reasonable to expect that right-wing social groups from across the spectrum will gravitate towards the BJP provided it can maintain just a semblance of constitutional decorum. That, however, is the moot point. And the reason it is so is that the cycle of violence unleashed by South Asia's sundry fascists and militarists is demonstrably suicidal and self-destructive. We do not have to look far to observe this tendency.

These statements might sound exaggerated, yet I believe many Indians will agree with them. Since Prime Minister Vajpayee takes it upon himself to begin musing and calling for national debates when he perceives his liberal 'image' to be slightly damaged, let us ask him and his ideological peers to participate in a national debate on the phenomenon of violence. Is the Government of India prepared to condemn violent political activity, and enforce Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code on anyone violating it? Can it guarantee that Article 21 of the Constitution (allowing us to remain alive) will not be withdrawn periodically by acts of omission or commission by state authorities? Will it declare arms training by political para-militaries illegal? Is it unaware of the violence being practiced and preached by members of the VHP and Bajrang Dal? Why should *jehadis* and Naxalites be banned while the Bajrangis and VHP cadre enjoy the patronage of the central government? Will it clearly state why *jehadi* violence is terrorism but the VHP's violence is nationalism?

Will its leaders publicly announce that 'outraged sentiment' is not sufficient reason for people to go on a killing spree? Are they prepared to condemn the politics of revenge and extra-legal punitive action? Will they tell us why a prime accused in the Mahatma Gandhi murder case, V.D. Savarkar, with his avowedly violent and communal philosophy, is touted as a big national hero? Democratic civil society must challenge the ruling party and the government to a debate on violence, rather than confine ourselves to community relations, important as these are. *If the BJP refuses to commit itself to upholding non-violence and the rule of law, it will have demonstrated that the party of 'cultural nationalism', is nothing but the Party*

of Violence, pure and simple. It remains to be seen how long the chambers of commerce can maintain their profits amidst the mayhem.

The French village of Albert lies near the battlefield of the Somme, where the British Army suffered 60,000 casualties on July 1, 1916, and whose farmers still discover bones and metal on a daily basis. Albert is home to several military cemeteries. The sheer meaninglessness of the butchery and the enormity of the death of a single person in war is brought out in this inscription on a soldier's grave: *"A sorrow too deep for words"*. But the graves of Albert are those of soldiers in wartime, killed on battlefields far from home. In India, ordinary people including little children face the prospect of being murdered in homes and familiar streets in peacetime. For the citizens of the world's largest democracy, the pain arising out of the caste and communal massacres that never seem to end is indeed a sorrow too deep for words. Was it not our greatest compatriot, Mohandas Gandhi, who named killing *dev-vadh*, the murder of God?

Every single human life is precious, every life snuffed out for the cynical political motives of the ruthless South Asian ruling elites is a treasure cruelly wasted. Humanity must step out of the shadow cast by its misdeeds, and launch the most wide-ranging of all mass movements, a global *satyagraha* against violence.

Speak the truth

Stop the killing

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APRIL 2003, AMAN TRUST SEMINAR: PAPER ON POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The Brains of the Living: A Discussion on Political Violence

> "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world." – Hannah Arendt, in *Reflections on Violence*

> "The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence." – Adolf Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*.

Introduction

The argument that I would like to develop may be summarised thus: Whereas violence is considered by various political tendencies as radical, productive of closure, and susceptible to legitimising (ideological) control; the truth is quite the opposite. First, violence is the most conservative, even primordial social relation in the history of human society. To treat violence as a radical element in the polity is to forget that it emanates from the lizard's brain that still resides in the human cranium. Second, violence does NOT result in the closure of any issue. Rather, it becomes autonomised in statehood and reproduces itself in an endless spiral, much like the accumulation of capital, to which (in modern times), it is inextricably tied. Third, the ideological bonds of legitimacy, by means of which society seeks to contain violence, have always remained tenuous

and fragile, leaving space for the autonomisation of systemic physical brutality and exterminism. This tendency (realised to greater or lesser degree) of violence to break free of institutional constraints, occurs across the political spectrum, and across the boundaries of state and civil society. Violence, to my mind, is not merely the symptom of a malaise, it is a malaise in itself. Understanding violence does not require a pragmatic debate (about its efficacy in this or that situation), but a phenomenological analysis about its intrinsic qualities, functions and effects.

The contemporary world is witness to the universal degeneration of democratic governance – viz, power exercised with the consent of the governed. The rulers of the world order have decided (as do the Indian authorities from time to time) to expose the brutality beneath the mask of 'civilisation' and 'the rule of law'. From Gujarat to Iraq, New York to Chechnya, Bosnia to Palestine, we find growing evidence of a contempt for human life. To use the language of Indian politics, communalism is now operating on a global scale. This is a complex historical issue, requiring much study and analysis. One stark aspect of political reality is the blurring of lines between state violence and violence deployed by those who claim to represent oppressed people. Another is the public awareness of brutality as a political tool.

The Sri Lankan anthropologist Pradip Jeganathan has an interesting explanation for this awareness. In his view, 'violence' is "an analytical name for events of political incomprehensibility". This name has gained currency because of the "de-legitimisation of received political narratives that produced that political comprehension in another time". Today we point to Rwanda, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Chechnya and Iraq as examples of the genocidal mania sweeping the world. However, the wars and political upheavals in Vietnam, Indo China and Indonesia in the 1960s and 70s cost over two million lives. Was there less violence then? Jeganathan says the violence of earlier decades had acceptable political names such as "imperialism", "communist aggression" and "nationalist uprising". What is known as 'violence' today cannot easily be placed under a suitable political sign. We suffer from "a profound loss of political space", which in his view, is the reason for the appearance of a new anthropological focus on 'violence'.

Jeganathan's implied suggestion that this is a matter of suitable nomenclature, is, to my mind misleading. There is indeed something new

about the violent phenomena of our times, such as the normalisation of genocidal politics, the recruitment of child soldiers and the complete erosion of the distinction between combatants and civilians. Society's ethical and political sensibilities change with experience, and democratic movements must acquire wisdom from these changes. Participants in the First World War departed for distant battlefields in an atmosphere of romance and adventure. This changed irrevocably in the first months of bloodletting in the trenches of northern France.

In the late 1930s, the bulk of European sentiment was decidedly against war. When Hitler made war inevitable, it was not a matter for celebration as it had been in 1914. After 1945, strong anti-war sentiment obliged the major powers to establish a global conflict-resolving institution, the UNO. It also inspired long-lasting peace movements across the world. And it is not accidental that the most violent decades of humanity's existence also produced profound interventions for non-violence such as those led by Mohandas Gandhi, Ghaffar Khan and Martin Luther King, and mass movements for peace, over the Vietnam war in the late1960s and 70s, and against the installation of MX nuclear missiles in Europe in the 1980s. Social attitudes towards violence and war have undergone major changes in the past decades. I believe another such change is both possible and necessary.

It is not that there is more violence today than there was in the 1940s or the 1960s. But, as the recent massive anti-war movements demonstrate (unlike the days of the Vietnam war, these began before, rather than after the outbreak of hostilities), there is an awareness that violence *does not* result in resolution, closure and a settlement of tensions, but rather, feeds an unending spiral of brutality. (Till this day, the dynamic effects of Partition and the Second World War continue to generate conflict in South Asia and the Middle East). What Jeganathan calls "a profound loss of political space" might actually signify the failure of available ethical and political explanations for the phenomena associated with human destructiveness. *Is violence incomprehensible, or are we too frightened to confront the truth about our theories and practices?*

Human beings need to invest their pain and suffering with some meaning. However today, a growing segment of public opinion is beginning to question ideologies that glorify violence. Perhaps people are beginning to understand violence as the self-reproducing language of

authoritarianism, even when it pretends to represent the oppressed. The appearance of 'violence' in the theoretical universe of the social sciences could represent realisation (as yet implicit rather than political), that mass murder and physical brutality are not 'tactics', but a manifestation of a social relation with its own dynamic.

Some Questions

There is, in short, a new question mark on the matter of violence. Certain issues require interrogation for a new perspective. These may be briefly stated as follows:

- Is violence simply the brutish power of oppressive social groups, or does it have deeper roots?
- Why have democratic movements reduced violence to a tactical question?
- *What explains the agreement amongst rivals on the so-called inevitability of violence?
- Is organised mass violence an aberration in the polity, or a mode of governance?
- What is the link between caste and communal violence?
- What are the political functions of religion, sentiment and identity?
- What are the flows and functions of violence as a social vector?
- Can social democracy afford to be neutral on the question of violence?
- How should civil society deal with the concepts of revenge, retaliation and collective guilt?
- What are the links between political violence and authoritarianism?
- Why has political conservatism become dynamic and socialism become conservative?

Contemporary society can ignore these questions only at its peril. I suggest that violence has acquired institutional autonomy in the modern world, and that treating it as a tactic will add fuel to the flames. Can we argue that World War II with its 55 million deaths, the genocide of six million European Jews and the explosion of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki have left the question of 'violence' at the same uncomplicated place that it was at the beginning of the twentieth century? Violence has been 'democratised' to the point where all civilians are

considered fair targets for murder, where the very distinction between civilians and combatants has been abolished. The century that invented the term 'exterminism' has left us with the fearful task of re-examining the crises of modernity, of re-stating the platform of social democracy.

Abstract and specific characteristics of the political realm

What are the chief elements and paradoxes of the domain of politics? Politics is concerned with the social universe, the public interest. In modern capitalist society, with its nation-statist forms, it is also the place wherein the interests of ruling groups and dominant social relations are represented as the universal interest, as a 'natural' state of affairs. Politics is supposedly the art of the possible – the practice of compromise. It is the place where pragmatism reigns, the zone within which it is said that the end justifies the means.

The forced separation between ends and means exemplifies the instrumentalist ideology that dominates the mental universe of capitalist modernity. Is state power merely an amoral instrument of class domination, and violence merely the expedient method of seizing it? Do political ends remain unaffected by the means employed to reach them? Or do the ends get transformed by violent means? We need a clear picture (as far as possible) of virtuous political ends; of the difference between 'peace' based on oppressive and exploitative production relations, and a peace that denotes more equitable social relationships. Moreover, as Arendt points out, since even the greatest political goals have shown tendencies to go astray, we had better take more notice of the means we employ to attain them.

The term *ideology* is not a synonym for political theory. Ideologies represent historical social forms as if they were a part of nature – in brief, they *naturalise* social relations. Today's ideologies must be subjected to theoretical criticisms that demonstrate that class, caste, race and patriarchy *are not the inevitable products of human nature, but historical forms,* subject to change

One form of modern ideology is the 'timeless community' known as the Nation, service to which is supposed to be the highest virtue. The ideology of nationalism masks the ways in which social, economic and political relations are *globally* produced and upheld. The 'national good' cannot be

the starting point of political knowledge because the nation-state is itself a historically produced institution, whose form and stability is explicable only in a world-historic context.

Despite its rational self-image, the modern nation-state regularly deploys sentiment in the form of tradition, honour and loyalty. This happens in warfare and in legal systems, for example, in emblems of regiments and oaths taken upon holy books. These psycho-social forms and conventions exemplify the mobilisation of 'culture' and sentiment for purposes of governance.

Colonialism placed India in a subordinate position within the capitalist system. The period saw the emergence of new forms of capital (such as managing agencies), hybridised landlordism, and mediated, ethnographically marked methods of recruitment and management for labour-intensive work-processes. The colonial politics of labour embraced ethnicity and caste as 'essential' attributes, which became part and parcel of labour management. This remains true today. Indian capitalism uses social stigma, patriarchy, caste and the constant threat of violence to keep down labour costs, avoid the construction of social security systems, give permanent tax-exemption to employers in the informal sector and the rural rich, and undermine the potential of modern citizenship.

Democracy implies prior agreement on the definition of the *demos* – a concept that resembles religious concepts of '*the chosen race*'. The practice of democracy has been linked to the concept of identity. Thus, the *rule of the people* presumes that we know who the 'people' are, even before we speak of their right to 'self-determination'. Ideologically defined boundaries of the self and 'the people' are presupposed in the practice of democracy. This issue is related to the development of the nation-state and the notion of sovereignty. Identity is an ideological construction, a matter of political power and class interest. It is expressed in various forms, religion-based, ethnic and linguistic, etc. Communalism is one type of identity, but all political identities are not communalist in orientation

The popular terms, *Left* and *Right* are products of modern history. They refer to political spaces that are stable, but they represent changing social vectors and fluctuating political ideas. These include Progress versus Conservatism; Industry, Modernity, Science and Reason, versus Tradition, Stability, Hierarchy and Religion. What is noteworthy is that *the Right has become dynamic and the Left has become conservative*. The Right argues

for (its version of) internationalism and institutional change. The Left defends nationalism and the status quo, and sections of it even flirt with xenophobia, or a hatred of things 'foreign'.

Authoritarianism operates in all segments of the political spectrum, albeit with different historical functions. We have two ways of interpreting this fact: one, that authoritarianism is (apparently) politically neutral, and two, that the appearance of authoritarianism signifies the right-wing degeneration of the Left. I would argue that the organisation of violence is the beginning of a process that merges political authoritarianism, even when it appears otherwise. In concept and epistemology, the appearance in the Left's worldview of manicheanism (the reading of all issues in black and white terms) and Absolute or Revealed Truth, exemplifies this merger of authoritarianism.

Democracy is a political principle of association, and a democratic constitution is an institutional arena wherein the tensions of class society play themselves out in an ongoing process. Democracy is unstable, and subject to inner growth or decay. The growth of democracy implies greater popular involvement in control of daily life and at the workplace. The decay of democracy results from the action of those vested interests which are threatened by the existence of popular movements for social transformation.

The persistence of democratic institutions is a threat to those class forces and structures that benefit from conventional forms of social oppression. This is the foundation for authoritarian politics. It has been present since the advent of democratic movements in India, and has had major successes – most notably, the communal Partition. *Then as now, communal politics has denoted, first and foremost, an assault on secular citizenship.*

Theorising violence

Violence may be systemic and structural; or immediate and corporal. Political violence is an outcome and expression of systemic violence. The more it is practiced, the more does corporal punishment become normalised in daily life. Violence is a social relation embedded in all forms of authority and oppression. (If violence and intimidation were subtracted from gender, caste and racial oppression, these structures would collapse).

Hence it carries a relationship with politics as well as religion. It is the grammar of economic exploitation, social oppression and patriarchy, the saturated form and expression of oppressive production relations. The modern state is a crystallisation of centuries of violence and domination.

Because humans are the only species to invent ethical justifications for mass murder, the phenomenon of violence is associated with explanations of evil and criminality. This is why God, Nation, etc are brought into the picture, as legitimizers of 'selfless' violence. The concept of Revenge (the emotional basis for justice, and a predominant theme in religious traditions), gives violence (like courage) moral fluidity, the potential of attaching itself to virtue. This provides space for theological and political justification.

As substratum of state institutions, violence requires institutionalisation and instrumentalisation. The organisation of violence requires and generates despotism and authoritarianism. As grammar of power, violence reproduces itself and generates a dynamic that (potentially) can transcend politics.

The dynamism associated with violence derives from a spiral of revenge and irrationality, and is sustained by norms of virility, honour and shame. Its generator is binary otherness, through which all forms of brutality become justified by reference to chronological sequence, as in the phrase: *they started it*.

As regards its impact on human sensibilities, violence bends time, distorts the sense of sequence, confuses cause and effect, and perverts historical consciousness towards one-sidedness (the violence perpetrated by my enemy always seems much worse than that indulged in by me or my allies). Such intellectualising, however, evaporates in the extreme moments of exterminism and annihilation, when pure destructiveness takes over. This tendency, of *self-generation beyond self-control* is the clue to the autonomous dynamic referred to above.

The arms industry and ethnicity-based politics are complementary poles in global capitalist governance. The first represents a gigantic investment in violent conflict on the part of the global system (with its concomitant political, psycho-social and institutional arrangements); the second is capitalism's assimilable, acceptable form of violence.

Commenting on *goondaism* in Calcutta in 1947, Gandhi said that "evil by itself cannot exist in this world – it must feed upon the good. The

minute it is deprived of the sustenance of the good, it ceases to exist". This insight points to the ethical fluidity engendered by the practice of violence – a fluidity that perverts our moral capacities. Good and evil fluctuate in a constantly vacillating series of personae, like images in a hall of mirrors. The marriage between transcendent ideologies (incorporating Religion, Nation etc) and Violence has channeled humanity's baser instincts in an ongoing spiral of psychological, ethical and intellectual degeneration. This may only be countered by a well-considered re-integration of political and ethical approaches.

Religion, ideology and political violence

What is the meeting ground between the religious and the political realm?

Politics is not merely the art of obtaining and retaining power – it concerns a normative stance towards the present and the future. This is why we are obliged to rethink our positions disregarding religious or political authority – owning responsibility by exercising judgement and applying the mind.

Modern political science, economics and the sociology of administration, assume the pretense of rationality. In fact, the 'science' of politics requires the calibrated deployment of sentiment, from zones of law and ceremony to war and legitimised murder. There is an inbuilt tension in structures of governance. On the one hand modern state institutions require social stability and restraint for day-to-day functioning; on the other, the capitalist system breeds brutality and lack of restraint.

Religious concepts engage naturally with universal values such as the human being, human life. But insofar as religion is associated with identity politics and power, a contradiction appears between the implicit universality of religious philosophy and the ethical requirements of pragmatism (the suggestion that ends justify means). This is the beginning of moral chaos. In part this is due to the denaturing of theology, a decline in value systems directly linked to religions' new political functions. Religion is admirably suited to co-option within the instrumental rationality of advanced capitalism. It takes the appearance of an antidote to the spiritless secularism of money economy, but in fact becomes implicated in techniques of mass control.

The more religion accepts a new role as an insignia of political identity

in modern mass society, the further it moves from its ethical function. The dubious role of the Catholic Church with its pathological antisemitism in the European crisis of the 1930s and in the career of Nazism; the implication of American Baptists and the Dutch Reformed Church in the racist politics of the American deep south and South Africa respectively; the stranglehold of expansionist Zionism over Judaism after the Second World War; the prolonged degeneration of the fundamentalist current in Islam to the point that it has reached with the Taliban and Al Qaeda; the ease with which the violent right-wing in India has been able to assume the mask of Hindu resurgence; the transformation of the Akalis from their origins as an anti-imperialist and reformist movement into an elitist communal political vector; the involvement of Buddhist clergy in anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka over the past decades – all this points to an alarming fact. Despite the existence within world religions of pacifist, democratic currents, these have proven incapable of developing a new civilisational ethic of non-violence. All religions are today in an advanced stage of ethical decomposition. The crux of the matter turns upon the question of violence and the doctrine of collective guilt.

A New Agenda

Fascism is fixated by *Thanatos*, death and violence. The celebration of masculine virtue, the scapegoating of entire communities, the cult of victimisation and the search for lost glory are forms of this fixation. Common to all forms of fascism is a profound disrespect for human life. If any section of the Left cannot distinguish between the quest for human liberation and the fascist perversion of that quest, this indicates how far the age-old grammar of power and oppression has eaten into the socialist intellect. The more that social-democratic resistance uses violence, the further it strays from social liberation. Social democracy needs to reconstitute itself to struggle for a new global social contract. Its first principle must be the acceptance of non-violence by parties that aspire to run governments.

Any serious social-democratic programme has squarely to address the question of violence, and place on its agenda society's determination to liberate itself from fear and brutality. Because violence is both the expression and the symptom of social degeneration and political crisis,

placing it at the centre of a regional democratic agenda will generate a highly overdue social debate about the roots, forms and functions of violence. Questions of the iniquitous relations between the sexes, between social castes and classes, and the structured violence of the global polity, will acquire a fresh charge. The relationship between democratic institutions and the military-industrial complex; arms-dealers and insurgents; between violence in the family and in society at large, will come under social scrutiny.

The debate about violence needs to be generalised beyond political groups, and into civil society globally. Without the adoption of a firm politics of resisting violence, even as we articulate and struggle for the most radical of demands, an alternative world order will remain fantastical.

Speak the truth
Stop the killing

Addendum on The Question of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a complex philosophical and ethical matter whose implications differ depending on the nature of the wrong committed. When looked at from the viewpoint of victimised individuals, the issues may be (relatively) simple. From recent events we have the example of Mehsana, Gujarat, (1992), where the known culprits in a case of communally inspired murder decided to publicly confess their crimes to the family of the victims and ask their forgiveness. This was a moving demonstration of the power of grace and may be held up as an inspiration for those affected by such violence. But is personal forgiveness by the victims sufficient? It could be argued that the offender has transgressed the limits of society and harmed the social fabric. That the forgiving person/s may forgive for the wrong reasons, such as fear or the desire for acclaim. That society too, must obtain adequate recompense and guarantees.

Yet more complicated issues arise when we think of wrongs committed over long periods of historical time. How may we comprehend the extent of the violence and humiliation inflicted for centuries upon the untouchables by the Brahmanical social order, wherein social hierarchy and differentiated justice were (and still remain) sacralized? The constitutional avowal of affirmative action was a gesture of attenuation, but the extent of its success in inaugurating a regime of social equality

remains a matter of debate. Who can compute the pain of African villagers torn from their homes and sold into slavery, both by (Muslim) Arab and (Christian) European slave-traders? Who will or can offer them recompense, given the fact that their descendants are till this day the underclass of the most `developed' society on earth? Does anyone remain who may forgive the Caucasian race for obliterating Native Americans from the face of North America? Can Germany ever compensate Russia for two vicious and bloody invasions in the course of the century? Has Christianity really repented for anti-Semitism? Or has it enabled its victims to transmute themselves into Zionists and make Palestine into a Bantustan, thus perpetuating violence and bitterness?

The Rock of St Peter nurtured the Inquisition from the thirteenth century till 1870. Thomas de Torquemada, Grand Inquisitor of Spain alone sentenced over 10,000 `heretics' to the flames, and nearly a 100,000 to the galleys. Using the Biblical mandate, *"thou shalt not permit a sorceress to live"*, papal bulls from the thirteenth century onwards ordered hundreds of thousands of women murdered on suspicion of being witches. In matters of systematic misogyny and anti-semitism, the Protestant tradition was no better. It would be interesting to recapitulate the theological justifications for so much violence. Who remembers all this? Will the Vatican, which took over 450 years to withdraw the calumnies against Galileo (let alone atone for having blackmailed him with instruments of torture), ever ask for forgiveness from God or from the souls of its victims?

I have no desire to single out the Church in my citations. All the world's great religious traditions have rationalised violence and hatred against perceived enemies, weak and defenceless persons and women to some degree or the other. I am convinced that unless the contemporary bearers of these traditions remember the enormities committed in the name of God, take steps to alter their holy texts in the light of humane reason and in the language of their own spirituality, ask for forgiveness with genuine contrition, they stand before society as being incapable of practising what they preach.

From personal experience of violence, I can say that forgiveness is only possible as a gesture among equals, in an atmosphere where true contrition is perceptible on the part of the wrongdoer. *Equal* does not imply social equality but an equality in spiritual status, in human dignity. Where equality and contrition are lacking, the act of forgiveness becomes

a psychic device for assuaging the sense of injustice in the heart of the wronged person or party and little different from the aspiration that the Almighty will dole out justice (read retribution) to his/her/their enemies in the end. Insofar as political life is a mediated reflex of social and individual interests and sentiments, it is imbued with the psychological element.

Collective memory is the substratum of human history and culture. As such the relationship between history and memory is a vast subject, generalisations about which would be difficult and could be trivial. We should note however, that both examples cited in the seminar – Gandhi and Mandela – are men who insisted on an equality of status (and that of the people they represented), with their oppressors. They insisted on justice being done and being seen to be done and did not budge from their positions until they achieved satisfaction on these counts. The element of forgiveness entered their politics as a potential, as the proferred hand of an equal, whose commitment was marked by faith in non-violent transformation. Politics in the Gandhian sense is the laboratory *par excellence* wherein ethical truths may be tested. It is the social sphere which fuses the experience and conduct of mundane existence with those of the moral and if you like, spiritual dimension.

Within politics (defined in this way), the quality of forgiveness can only possess meaning when it is the basis of an ongoing project of transformation. When we are being continually oppressed, it is not given to us to be continually forgiving, without in some way reducing our human stature. Such forgiveness will degenerate and/or be ideologically absorbed into the discourse of the oppressors. We may forgive, or hold out the prospect of forgiving, when we have refused humiliation. Gandhi's *ahimsa*, in its spiritual as well as political sense, is an outstanding expression of the doctrine of forgiveness. As he used to say, it is not a doctrine of the weak but a weapon of the brave. It is an active, not passive, choice in favour of dignity, humanity and self-restraint. And it stands intact as a positive alternative in the context of a troubled and rapidly changing world.

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The appendix contains an extract from *The Retributive Impulse and the Politics of Remembering: The Search for Justice in a Troubled Decade*, a presentation made at a seminar on Memory, Politics and Forgiveness in Vidya Jyoti, Delhi, June 1999.

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Between Despair and Hope: Interrogating 'Terrorism'

Terror and warfare empower neither men nor women, Left or Right. On the contrary, it imprisons all of humanity in an endless spiral.

> "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world"
> – Hannah Arendt

The words 'terror' (meaning intense fear and dread), and 'terrorism' (the systematic employment of violence and intimidation to coerce a government or community into acceding to specific political demands) are steeped in controversy. From the time of the French Revolution, 'terrorism' has been used to describe a range of violent political activism, including certain forms of Russian populism; Italian, Serbian and Irish nationalism; anarchism; and the actions of the Ku Klux Klan. Nowadays, 'terror' is what the 'civilised world', led by the United States, is combating. It is identified with Islamist fundamentalism, the Taliban, suicide bombers, Palestinian resistance, and Maoist revolutionaries. Even though terrorism is quite clearly a form of political violence, mainstream journalism today does not associate it with aerial bombardment (although Hitler's use of the Luftwaffe against the Spanish town of Guernica in 1936 was considered an act of terror); armed action by the American and Israeli defence and special forces against their real or perceived enemies, kidnapping, collective punishments, and encounter killings by the apparatus of various South Asian states. In India 'terrorism' is also not generally used to describe

the activities of the Bajrang Dal, VHP, RSS, the Ranvir Sena or the Shiv Sena, even though some of their activities would qualify them as terrorists within the dictionary meaning of the word. Yes, the usage of 'terror' is heavily politicised.

Stark examples of these differentiated standards of judgement confront us when we consider the boundaries that religion shares with the world of terror. Contemporary common sense does not associate Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity or Hinduism with terror and terrorism. However, Sinhalese Buddhist monks have been known to participate in anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka. The Zionist Stern Gang and Irgun indulged in 'communal killings' of Palestinian villagers to enforce the evacuation of territory. Irish nationalists and loyalists alike (Catholics and Protestants) used terror for decades as an integral part of their politics. And it is the Hindu (Tamil Tigers) who began the latest use of suicide bombers – Rajiv Gandhi was killed by one in 1991. Let us not fool ourselves. Every major religious tradition has produced theological justifications for murder and mass killing in the name of sacred causes. And it is clear that terror is and has been employed by states and anti-state activists alike.

Historically, national liberation movements and democratic movements have often taken for granted that violent means would be necessary for the attainment of their ends. The French Revolution of 1789 was the first major instance of the marriage of terror with modern democracy. "There is nothing which so much resembles virtue as a great crime", said Robespierre's comrade, St Just, one of the architects of the Reign of Terror in 1794. Mid-nineteenth century Italian nationalism was an inspiration for military style patriotism in the early twentieth century, such as the Serbian, Irish and Indian. Russian populism, which later emerged as the Left Socialist Revolutionary tendency, used terrorist methods in varying degrees, as did Anarchists and Bolsheviks. Trotsky wrote a lengthy pamphlet, *Terrorism and Communism*, justifying such acts as hostage-taking as a means of ensuring good behaviour by 'class enemies'.

Terrorism is the quintessentially ambivalent political deed, the place where good and evil are mixed to the point where its proponents need to invoke God, or a secular metaphysic such as History or Revolutionary Destiny, as justification. Apparently transcendental dogma can transform great crimes into virtuous deeds. In a situation where terror has become normalised (virtually the entire span of the past century), it is to be

expected that rational debate aimed at understanding political crises become next to impossible. For example, in the post-9/11 world, anyone putting forward a historical analysis of the emergence of Islamist fundamentalism against a background of Western imperialist policies in West Asia, Arabia, Palestine, Iran and Afghanistan, would draw suspicion in establishment circles as an apologist for terrorists – even if he or she vehemently denies such sentiments. Someone who adduces the reparations imposed upon Germany in 1918 as a factor contributing to the rise of Nazism, is not necessarily a sympathiser of Hitler. In considering the history of Zionism, we would have to remember that Christian antisemitism provided fertile ground for Nazi ideology and the genocide of European Jews, which in turn fuelled the demand for a Jewish homeland. Such an analysis would not imply an approval of Israeli expansionism and oppression of Palestinians.

It is the historian's job to suggest explanations of major events by weighing context with cause, structure popular moods and ideological developments. In today's world however history is rapidly being replaced by propaganda. Speaking about terrorism in 1998, the late Eqbal Ahmad described the official approach to it as one that eschews causation and avoids definition, because such concepts involve "analysis, comprehension and adherence to some norms of consistency". He cited a query about the causes of Palestinian terrorism, addressed by the Yugoslavian foreign minister to US Secretary of State George Shultz, twenty years ago. Shultz "went a bit red in the face. He pounded the table and told the visiting foreign minister, there is no connection with any cause. Period." (*The New York Times, 18 December 1985*). Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee told the United Nations General Assembly that all talk of 'root causes' served only to justify terrorism. However, his RSS soulmates routinely talk of 'root causes' when they need to defend the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992. Terrorism has a 'root cause' when we identify with it but becomes a monstrous violation of human rights when we don't. Such ethical contortions are as common in the ranks of left-wing intellectuals as they are among religious fundamentalists and the ultra-right.

The decline of conversation

The dynamic nature of social reality implies the need for constant

theoretical reflection. Without this, the radical imagination loses itself in the dominant discourses of capitalism, nationalism and identity. This is what is happening today, even within the so-called extreme left. Unfortunately, this trend is buttressed by the habit of denigrating critical thought to a level inferior to so-called 'activism'. A further complication is that nationalist ideology and capitalist media have perverted the concept of truth. In the first case, God or Truth (sometimes named History) is always with Us. In the second case, truth is substituted by credibility. This is demonstrated by the phenomenon of advertising. The truth-content of a message is of no importance, what matters is whether it is credible or incredible. This is why the concept of 'image' dominates modern political vocabulary, despite the obvious distinction between 'image' and 'reality'. The war of images goes on in the political realm as well and affects the question of terror. As they say, one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. We owe it to ourselves and the coming generations to pierce the imagery and arrive at a well-considered understanding of terror and political violence.

The dogmatism surrounding political theory in India has reduced radical politics to a moribund condition. The Leninist concept of "the outside" and the Stalinist convention that "the party is always right" imply an authoritarian notion of truth. The comrades' habit of claiming possession of Absolute Truth (Party Line = *Param Satya*) is similar to the religious belief in divine revelation *(ilhaam)*. Such approaches to knowledge are shared by organisations as far apart as the Vatican (with its notion of papal infallibility), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Taliban (and its variants), and various Leninist groups and parties. This attitude is an important causative factor for the fractious nature of South Asian leftism. An absolutist mentality finds ambivalence intolerable. Faced with historical complexity, it finds refuge in black and white ideas about the social universe. The resulting theoretical vacuum has left questions such as the value of democracy and the nature of violence to be treated as 'tactical' matters rather than as aspects of social relations. The political ideologies dominant in our time attach a pragmatic or positive value to violence and to the Nation. The word 'foreign' is too easily used as a term of abuse. Many radical political currents treat democracy as something to be used rather than preserved. Where it is yet to be achieved, its protagonists preach but do not practice democracy within the movement – they believe

authoritarian methods can achieve democratic goals.

Such issues need to be addressed. Unfortunately, it has become a habit among radical activists and intellectuals to attribute base motives to those who criticise established doctrine. Polemic is what passes for debate and discussion in the Indian socialist tradition. (*polemos* in Greek means strife). Our mode of debate is often coloured by personal remarks, sarcasm and pointless rhetoric. Indeed, there will be moments when nasty verbal contests become unavoidable, but the replacement of all political conversation by polemic is symptomatic of an authoritarian attitude to ideas. Polemic reinforces factionalism, causes useless distraction and is a waste of time. It also signifies mental laziness. Instead of a careful and rigorous consideration and/or refutation of critical ideas, we prefer to dismiss them with contempt. Firm adherence to dogma may be psychologically comfortable, but it can only ensure political marginalisation.

The Militarisation of Social Democracy

The word 'terror' is used to distinguish between forms of violence. In commonplace conversation, it conveys the meaning of something other than war, mass resistance, police action, and so on. Closer attention will reveal that political terror is a manifestation of militarism in the domain of civil society – whether expressed by left- or right-wing terrorists. Actually the very norms by which we define Left and Right need re-definition. Right-wing neo-liberals often talk of the need for far-reaching economic and political reform, whereas leftists seem to be taking a conservative position. Multinational corporations advocate a capitalist version of internationalism, whereas leftists appear to have become nationalists, paying lip-service to international working-class solidarity. Rightists fabricate history one way, leftists do it another way. Nobody can say whether the terms 'left' and 'right' carry any definitional meaning for ethnic identity movements – support for or opposition to Lankan Tamil, Kurdish, Baloch, Kashmiri, Naga or Tibetan self-determination depends upon political convenience or pure whim rather than consistent principle. When it comes to positions regarding war, militarism, nuclearism, violence, patriarchy, democratic freedoms, human rights or ecological degradation, it is difficult to discern a systematic difference between left and right. The

Communist Party of China has become (effectively) the Capitalist Party of China. It supported Yahya Khan in 1971, and even launched a war against Vietnam in 1979. As Orwell once said, there is no enormity that we condemn in the conduct of our enemies that we would not commit ourselves. Is there a way out of this labyrinth? There is, but only if we embark once more upon fearless critique.

Left-wing terrorists, including certain left-nationalists and communists, display a self-conscious attempt to convert social democratic protest and struggle into a form of warfare ('social democracy' is used here in its broadest and pristine meaning, as the original name of the socialist movement). The capitulation of Europe's major social democratic parties to war hysteria and patriotism in August 1914 was arguably the greatest political disaster in the history of international socialism. It is a complex and tragic tale, but the nature of twentieth century communism was unalterably coloured by warfare and the warrior cult. In fact, the century gone by has been the bloodiest period in the life of humanity. One result has been the appearance of Bonapartism, the domination of the communist movement by men of military stature – warlords like Stalin and Mao. Another was the erosion of any respect for human life – mass slaughter came to be accepted as the natural price to pay for 'victory'.

This mixture of socialism, nationalism and militarism has produced many political hybrids. Subhas Chandra Bose was one of them. In India today it is not a good idea to criticise Subhas, a popular icon for many leftists, even though he allied himself with Hitler's imperial war aims and bemoaned the defeat of the Axis. Although it takes off from a conservative standpoint, fascism, too, is one of these hybrids – and religion-based communalism is South Asia's brand of fascism. In summary definition, communal politics are projects for the militarisation of civil society. The ultra-left programme of 'people's war' feeds upon the same mentality. The utilitarian morality expressed by the phrase "the end justifies the means" has cast its effect on Left and Right alike. Quite apart from the matter of political ethics, it is remarkable that the Maoist worldview finds 'peoples war' as relevant in India as it does in Nepal, despite the obvious differences in the constitutions of the two countries.

Among some comrades, it would appear, that strategies are decided upon first, and doctrinal justifications invented later. It is also significant that the ultra-left and the ultra-right avoid confrontation with one another.

Thus, in its declaration of October 2004, the newly formed Communist Party of India (Maoist) stated that armed struggle would "remain the highest and main form of struggle and the army the main form of organisation of this revolution". The main purpose of mass organisations would be "to serve the war". The declaration makes a passing reference to "Hindu fascist forces", but makes it clear that it would keep "the edge of the people's struggles directed against the new Congress rulers in Delhi along with the CPI/CPM and their imperialist chieftains". On August 15, the CPI-Maoist (allegedly) carried out an armed action in Andhra Pradesh, gunning down an MLA, his son, driver, some local Congress activists and a municipal employee. The ideology that can cast such ordinary people for the role of "class enemies", deserving extra-judicial execution, reflects a mentality closer to fascism rather than socialism. These 'revolutionaries' have not even publicly challenged the mass murderers responsible for pogroms in India during 1984 (Delhi) and 2002 (Gujarat), let alone call them to account. Yet they constantly direct scornful polemic at all kinds of moderate democratic politics. Apparently radical rhetoric establishes one's commitment to the public good; and proposing violent solutions provides proof of one's admirable character.

A callous disregard for human life is apparent among 'revolutionary' groups in South Asia. In August 2004, 13 people were killed (including 9 children) and 20 injured due to a bomb planted by the United Liberation Front of Assam at an Independence Day function in upper Assam. In June 2005, 40 or more bus passengers, mostly peasants and working people, were killed in a land mine set off by Maoists in the Chitwan district of Nepal. The ULFA call themselves Marxists, as do the Nepali comrades. Marxist revolutionaries perceive themselves as guardians of human rights, democracy and justice. We need to ask them – what is the ground for your claim to represent the poor? Who gave you the authority to be judge and executioner and kill people without even the pretence of a consensual procedure to decide guilt and award punishment? Why do you complain about extra-judicial killings by the state when you have no qualms about carrying out such killings yourselves? Is there any human rights body that the victims of your cruelty (or your bloody 'mistakes') could approach for justice? Why do you talk about the "murder of democracy" (this is how the Indian Maoist party described the ban imposed upon it after their 'action' on August 15) when you have no respect for the lives of children and poor

people, let alone for democratic values and norms?

With honourable exceptions, human rights activists remain silent or defensive about atrocities committed by proponents of revolution and self-determination. This strengthens the impression among the general public that 'preferred' victims qualify as human beings, but if they happen to belong to the wrong caste or religion or profession, or simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time, their lives are dispensable. Sensitive observers the world over have rightly protested the atrocious principle of 'collateral damage' invoked by the Pentagon when its soldiers and pilots kill people they say were not targeted. It is equally infuriating when successive US presidents talk about 'American lives' as if Arabs and Rwandans and Vietnamese belonged to an insect species. But is it not apparent that revolutionaries of various kinds function with their own version of 'collateral damage'? And what of situations where civilians are deliberately targeted? World War II abolished the distinction between combatants and civilians. We, who dreamt of a better life for humanity, have descended to the point where the deliberate slaughter of bystanders and bus passengers by 'our' side barely causes us to raise an eyebrow. Even to point to this selective and self-righteous morality causes intense irritation among the ranks of the politically correct. For socialists to 'normalise' the commission of mass murder, is nothing short of an ethical-political catastrophe. And it lends a poignantly different meaning to Marx's warning that the choice before humanity is either socialism or barbarism.

Autumn of the Patriarchs

After the overthrow of the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings and the rise of democratic politics, the process of governing became impossible without some degree of popular legitimation. That is why even empires and dictators talk of freedom and the will of the peoples. But these developments, associated with modern capitalism, cannot occlude the fact that the state is the institutionalised crystal of centuries of warfare. At its core are the armies that (in nineteenth century Europe), countered universal adult suffrage with universal male conscription; and the ideals of equality, reason and compassion with hierarchy, faith and the glory of war. We may judge for ourselves which set of values conquered the twentieth century. The Great War of 1914-18 ended with the overthrow of

four medieval autocracies. But alongside the establishment of Weimar democracy, the defeated German army of 1918 set in motion a political process that culminated in the conquest of the state by Nazism. It is the greatest historical irony that it was democracy that enabled ex-corporal Hitler to become Reich Chancellor, and that his actions led not only to the overthrow of democracy but to the complete destruction of the German Army. Fifty-five million people paid the ultimate price. Hitler's regime was the historical acme of state terrorism – those who use these words frequently ought to study it. And the most glaring feature of the political mobilisation that preceded it was the binary dynamic of fear and revenge.

Contrary to their self-understanding, the political paramilitaries and revolutionary warriors of all kinds are the loyal opposition of capitalist modernity. They share its fascination and structural use of revenge, martyrdom, heroism and patriarchal codes of honour, that invariably imply misogyny. Hence, they are the last refuge of patriarchy. Each of their 'heroic' actions strengthen the state, as each side counters war with more war, terror with counter-terror, revolutionary militarism with statist militarism. The link between state violence and the violence of left-right radicalism has become seamless – each feed upon the other. This process is unfolding before our eyes. With 9/11 and, indeed, with every act of murderous resistance, hard won democratic rights are further eroded, and the state gathers legitimacy to impose draconian laws. With the growth of a universal climate of fear, the bonds between governments and the ordinary public are strengthened, rather than dissipated. This takes place, not on basis of class interests, but on account of the dreadful fear of the murder of innocent people. What happens then is an unending spiral of violence, driven by the lust for revenge, which is very difficult to control. As Hannah Arendt said, all this bloodshed will indeed change the world, probably for the worse.

It is impossible to achieve democracy by authoritarian means. A new dispensation may be realised, by such methods, but it will carry with it the whiff of tyranny. Those who survive such a revolution will be a brutalised and damaged people. Undoubtedly the Nepali establishment, an outdated remnant of arrangements made between Nepali feudal potentates and the British during the heyday of imperialism, has managed to survive by maintaining the sheer poverty and educational backwardness of the population. Their decision to impose customs duty on educational

books is only the latest example of their investment in ignorance. The government has also been assisted by cynical neighbours. The monarchy is not a 'pillar of stability', as its Indian well-wishers like to portray it, but the reverse. The Nepali state's brutal aversion to democratic governance perpetuates instability. But the sad state of affairs has been worsened by the ruthless and destructive policies of the revolutionaries (including the recruitment of children and disruption of education); and the bankruptcy of the moderate democratic opposition, who found it impossible, especially during the troubled decade of the 1990s, to construct a responsible united front. Constant factional fighting and egotism are also symptoms of authoritarianism.

The politics and practice of revolutionary terror are detrimental to socialist ideals. They represent and reproduce desperation, cynicism, organisational autocracy and doctrinal dogma. As such, they generate fear and paranoia in the ranks of the revolutionary cadre themselves as well as among the very people they seek to liberate. Most persons drawn towards terrorist politics are undoubtedly sincere in their vision and aspiration for a humane socio-economic order. But how easy it is to commit atrocities for the sake of kindness! To interpret our primeval lust for revenge as a source of 'modernisation', and 'progress'! Nearly 30 years ago, in 1976, this writer had the privilege of participating in a conversation (along with some close friends), with the great Marxist historian and peace activist E P Thompson. It was the year of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi, a development that had forced us to think seriously about the value of democratic rights. He made the acute observation that the use of the prefix 'bourgeois' before 'democracy' was the most self-defeating practice of communists the world over. Democracy, said Thompson, was a hard-won institutional gain of the international labour movement and in the Indian case, of the struggle for Independence. Rather than dismiss it as 'bourgeois', we ought to work for its preservation and extension into social life – that was what was meant by social democracy.

Many of us in India have realised the truth of this approach as we have traversed the difficult and painful quarter-century from the 1980s till today – a period that has seen the rampage of communalism and the politics of mass murder. It is significant that the Indian Left took a very long time to recognise the fascist nature of communalism. Even today, the relative weakness of our democracy is reflected in the fact that no party dares place

a resolution in Parliament condoling the death of thousands of victims of communal violence. Nonetheless, despite its terrible flaws, certain democratic norms, institutions and practices remain alive in the Indian polity. Groups that support the politics of secession or armed revolution still manage openly to propagate their ideas. Would it be possible, say, for a Tibetan version of the Hurriyat Conference to function in China, before or after Mao's death? Or for Baloch or Sindhi secessionists to advocate separation from Pakistan, and conduct meetings with a visiting Indian dignitary? How much democratic freedom of expression and organisation could political opponents expect under a People's War regime?

An urgent political issue confronts those of us who identify with the civil liberties movement of the 1970s. The revolutionary movement of that time aimed at the violent overthrow of the constitutional polity, and the Indian ruling elite took refuge behind the rule of law. A quarter of a century later, significant sections of the radical left and its well-wishers became staunch defenders of the democratic rights and liberties enshrined in the Constitution, while the Indian establishment repeatedly showed its discomfort with constitutional proprieties. In fact, the most massive violations of law (witness the carnages of 1984 and 2002), have been practiced by establishment parties and politicians. This should make leftists think about their attitude to democracy – is it merely a tactic, or do democratic norms and institutions deserve a deeper philosophical commitment?

Satyagraha

The Left could begin to rejuvenate itself if it gave up its revelatory approach to truth, its dogmatic approach to knowledge, its metaphysical attitude to politics, and its addiction to the warrior cult – society's oldest and most powerful preserve of authoritarianism. The comrades should examine their conscience and consider the social consequences of children being denied an education and made accustomed to bloodshed and cruelty, and of armed groups and individuals functioning with the same kind of impunity that the army and police display. A mature course of action would be to agitate non-violently for a programme of political and social democracy and demilitarisation and engage in constructive work to better the lot of the people. This would gain them wider credibility and respect than they

will ever get via armed struggle. It will also gain them the gratitude of people whose lives are too full of violence and uncertainty. A close friend took a photograph of a slogan on the wall of a building in the village of Ghandruk in central Nepal after an armed clash between the army and the Maoists: *"Maobadi + Shahi Sena suniyojit daman banda gara."* Addressing both the Maoists and the 'royal army', the graffiti asks them to desist from bloodshed and 'deliberate suppression'. Whatever the support base of the Nepali comrades, there are also those who are tired and fearful of the bloodletting. Whatever the romance of extremism may once have been, freedom from fear has become a major political aspiration. Terror is no longer a means to an end – it has become an end in itself, autonomous of social and political control. It is no longer merely a symptom but the disease par excellence of capitalist modernity. Socialists should remember that respect for life and liberation from fear must be the foremost ideal and goal of socialism. Or else they will make themselves instruments of the system they claim to be combating.

The recruitment of women cadre and soldiers by paramilitaries is hailed by some comrades as a symbol of female 'empowerment'. Actually this should be characterised as yet another manifestation of the oppression of women by entrenched patriarchy. Would it not seem ridiculous to view child-soldiers as liberated children? Warfare empowers neither men nor women, it imprisons all of humanity in an endless spiral. Since 1914, we have never had peace – more than 200 million people were violently done to death in the twentieth century – and it is clear that 'modern civilisation' is structurally dependent upon war. That it is now recruiting women and children in the name of 'empowerment' is a travesty. The struggle for the complete equality of the sexes continues to be opposed bitterly by patriarchal structures and politicians. (The fate of India's Women's Reservation Bill is proof of this fact). Subjugation by fear is a common experience for women from all classes across the globe. Feminism is hence (implicitly) a struggle against militarism and terror.

The abolition of state terror and its twin brother requires the collaboration of all groups and movements working to end the grip of caste oppression, patriarchy, racism and the exploitation of labour. Wide-ranging campaigns are necessary against all forms of oppressive institutions, including militarist ones, in order to defang the enemy-producing killing-machine that the 'West' has become. But ambivalence

about brutality as a means of resistance must cease. Millions of Europeans and Americans are opposed to war. The imperial system can only be encouraged to implode, as did the USSR. It cannot be destroyed by military means without exacting a merciless price which no revolutionary can wish on the common people. Terrorist attacks will only increase fear and feed conservative ideologies, which is the aim of the rulers.

Is it possible to combine a radical programme with non-violence? Indeed, it is. Undermining the British Empire was the most radical programme in South Asia in the first half of the last century. In a time that identifies Pathans with religious fundamentalism, we may yet learn something from the work of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan of the North West Frontier Province, aka Badshah Khan and the Frontier Gandhi, and the Khudai Khidmatgar ('servants of god') movement of the 1930s, whose commitment to non-violence was based on Pukhtunwali culture and Islam. The Khudai Khidmatgar's alliance with the national movement as a whole, its popular constructive projects and openness to non-Pathans and non-Muslims alarmed the colonial rulers, who subsidised the clergy to denounce its members (popularly known as the Red Shirts), as Bolsheviks and enemies of Islam. Confronting massacres, torture and repression, the Khudai Khidmatgar emerged as one of the staunchest Gandhian movements in the history of South Asian nationalism.

The Frontier Gandhi instructed his followers: "abstain from violence and do not defame your nation, because the world will say how could such a barbarous nation observe patience". Even as the 'civilising' Englishmen behaved like mad dogs, the 'volatile' Pathans were teaching their rulers a lesson in restraint. A Turkish scholar who visited the Frontier in the 1930s suggested that the Pathans had developed a new interpretation of force. In her words, "non-violence is the only form of force which can have a lasting effect on the life of society… And this, coming from strong and fearless men, is worthy of study". Badshah Khan was the last of those Gandhian stalwarts who could walk across four international boundaries in post-1947 South Asia and be treated by the citizens of each country as one of their own. His life work exemplified the compassionate spirit that stayed alive during the bleakest period of the twentieth century, proof that the self-assertion of the oppressed need not always be strident and narrow-minded. That he was an Indian national leader even after he became a Pakistani citizen ought to give chauvinists of all colours some food for thought. Not

for nothing was it written of him, that "people brought him food and sat him down in the shade of trees".

Let us also spare a thought for Chander Singh Garhwali, a platoon commander in the Garhwal Rifles. He was leading Hindu soldiers facing a Muslim crowd in Peshawar in 1930. He was court-martialled for refusing to order firing on his fellow-countrymen. Somewhere, somehow Chander Singh and his troops too had been affected by the spirit of ahimsa. Decades before, so had the ordinary Russian soldiers who refused to shoot women demonstrators on International Women's Day in St Petersburg in 1917, thus heralding the overthrow of Tsarism and the advent of the Russian Revolution. Would it not be truly radical for the revolutionaries to prevail over the soldiers and policemen via their conscience rather than through fear? Did not Gandhi speak profoundly when he said that what is obtained by fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts? The radicalism of satyagraha consists in this, that it (potentially) abolishes the distinction between method and goal. 'Overcoming' ceases to be a military concept and social democracy transcends its hysterical tension over ends and means.

Today, when South Asia is engulfed in civil strife and civil war, it is time to consider again whether the pursuit of truth and non-violent resistance are not the only radical social procedures left for the survival of the biosphere. The movement must be the germ of its goal. Social democracy's associative principles and active ethos must prefigure those of the society it wishes to create. Ahimsa is not a tactic but the ethos of respect for life. That which claims to be new must stand on its own feet.

Speak the truth
Stop the killing

This article includes material extracted from the author's earlier publications including a lecture in Patna delivered in 2000, entitled *The End of History or the Beginning of Transformation?*; the seminar paper, *The Brains of the Living: A Discussion on Political Violence* (Patna, April 2003); and the articles *The Enemy System* (Hindustan Times, December 6, 2002); *The Threads of Conscience* (Biblio, March-April 2002); and *Out of the Shadow* (Communalism Combat, February 2003.

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2006, PENGUIN BOOKS, REBELLION TO RECONCILIATION

Rebellion to Reconciliation

My transition from the politics of violent 'overthrow' and 'seizure of power', to the politics of non-violent resistance and transformation was a long and tempestuous journey.

The title theme, 'Rebellion to Reconciliation', given to me was meant to elicit the description of a personal trajectory relating to political choices and ideas. Even if I had changed the title, as I was first inclined to do, this would perhaps still have remained the essence of the story. It is difficult to encompass many turbulent years, painful transitions and treasured friendships in a necessarily brief essay and I shall inevitably be doing something or someone an injustice. Nonetheless, I have grasped an opportunity for reflection and communication. I hope to be pardoned lapses in this narration of salient developments in an exciting journey. Honouring the most distinctive lesson of my student years, I will be frank rather than euphemistic. This is as it used to be in the late-night informal discussions in college.

It would be arrogant to claim that intellectual openness was lacking in Delhi University campuses other than St Stephen's College in my time. Their alumni must surely have memories as lively as mine. Nor did the passionate convictions of the group to which I belonged go unchallenged. But the outstanding fact was being thrown among people the likes of whom I never imagined existed, to be encouraged to debate and discuss burning issues with complete freedom, and to be fearless while forming one's opinions. In a sense, this was an aspect and emanation of Indian democracy, something we used to trash and scorn 35 years ago. But it was

also the ethos of the college – a place where some of the most eccentric, brilliant, funny and warm-hearted characters I have ever met, had congregated.

I've always found it patronising when told versions of the dictum that if you are not a communist when you are 20, you are heartless, and if you are still one at 40, you are a fool. But we were ready to storm heaven. There have always been young people who were not rebels, as there are many in middle age who refuse to be pillars of the establishment. Even so, there was something electric about being young in the late 1960s. This was a period that will be remembered historically as the 1968 era. That was the year of the Prague Spring, the Tet offensive by the National Liberation Front in Vietnam, the May uprising by students and workers in France, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Cultural Revolution in China, the Black Power salute by US athletes at the Mexico Olympics. It marked the height of productivity for the greatest 'pop' musicians (I still believe this!) of all time. Students the world over were affected by a radicalism that came not from the campuses, but from factories and fields in every continent, from Vietnam, Cuba, South Africa and Palestine. It was hard not to be affected by this atmosphere, especially as it coincided with explosive discontents in India, where anti-Congress state governments were elected for the first time in numbers in 1967, and the Communist movement was riven with demands for a more 'revolutionary' approach.

From our tiny corner of the world in Delhi University, the elitist snobbery of many students, the pomposity of some professors, and the smug self-satisfaction of those who felt assured of a ticket into the establishment, could not occlude the fact that, despite itself, St Stephen's College produced a phalanx of left-wing students. It was from here that for some reason, the largest number of student radicals in Delhi emerged with the commitment to do their bit to change the world. How far they succeeded remains a matter of debate. But they changed their own lives and those of their families and friends, irrevocably. That this could happen to me is, to my mind, a direct outcome of the kind of place the college was.

Youthful passion and its outcomes are not easily described. My experience of going as part of a Social Service League team to Palamau in February 1967 was overwhelming. I was the only fresher – my team-mates were Arvind Narayan Das, Vikram Chandra, Lalit Sharma and Vijay Singh. Observing the penury of the Indian peasants in the midst of famine was

an eye-opener like no other. The District Magistrate of Palamau, Kumar Suresh Singh (with whom I had the privilege of renewing my acquaintance in later years), deputed us to the deep interior to report on relief operations. Arvind, Vikram and I were sent to Narsinghpur Pathra, my first glimpse of village life in the Bihar countryside.

I still remember Arvind, who died tragically in 2000, telling me it was a 'reformist illusion' to think any good would come of distributing food from relief kitchens. He introduced me to Marxism. I was perplexed and impressed! Today I find little to choose between reformist illusion and revolutionary delusion – but more on that later. That was also the time when the Naxalbari uprising had just taken place and the communist movement was convulsed with intense debate about its ramifications. The discussion spilled over into college campuses, ours being no exception. In 1968, Arvind became the first (and last?) Naxalite to be elected President of the St Stephen's College students' union. The following year, our group of radicals, including comrades from Hindu College, Miranda House and Jubilee Hall, staged a hilarious political lampoon called *India '69*, which was a big hit.

I cannot dwell too long on the complex reasons why some of us decided to become active revolutionaries. It was emotionally taxing to cause one's parents and families so much travail. Somehow it felt as if we had no option, that this was like the freedom movement all over again, that if young and committed Indians did not do what was necessary to change the dreadful conditions in which most of our fellow-countrymen and women lived, we would be betraying the most precious values of life. Since these values had been instilled in us by our parents, some of us experienced this decision partly as an act of filial devotion. We kept each other's morale afloat with anecdotes and laughter and expectation of historic events. Arvind and Rabindra, two of my closest friends, went 'UG', or underground, in May 1970. Later that year, I followed, along with several others. I was then in my MA Final. Despite our estrangement from the college establishment not all our teachers felt hostile towards us. Among others, the college pastor, Rev. Daniel O'Connor befriended us and sympathised with our ideals. I have remained close friends with him and his wife Juliet over the years. I have written about those times in a short story published in *Civil Lines* in 1997. A Dutch friend who read it told me she liked it, but that it seemed a bit contrived in places. I had to tell her that

truth was stranger than fiction.

This brings up an issue that straddles academic and existential concerns. In recent years I have conversed with certain ultra-left students who would get exasperated with my criticism and suggest to me that my first-hand recollections of the Naxalite movement are a fabrication, a claim made with intent to defame. This is an accusation that I must explore even at the risk of looking for profundity in trivia. On the one hand it touches the issue of historical method. While the historical materialist tradition has great scholars in its pantheon, not to mention lesser lights whose contributions are not to be scoffed at, there remains a leftist distinction between esoteric and exoteric thought, between aristocratic and demotic mental realms. This should not be confused with the problem of dogma and its ramifications. It would be possible for a materialist historian to accept that X followed the 'correct line' three decades ago and now thinks differently. This conclusion could be based on some generally acceptable method of collection and cross-verification of facts. But for the more simple-minded, it is unbelievable that a comrade of yesteryear could now be so critical. If he is critical today, he must have been a reactionary from birth. If he claims to have been a comrade in those halcyon days and knows what he is talking about, he must be lying. And since it is not possible for comrades to agree on a method of historical verification, the simplest explanation for his iconoclastic ideas is that he must be conspiring to defame.

The polemical manner the debate about Stalinism has been treated in the Communist tradition highlights the urgency of the question of method. Historical method for the dogmatist is a means of rubbing out those parts of reality that are inconvenient to one's black-and-white worldview. The question of truth and its procedure is simultaneously an ethical and sociological concern, with relevance for social scientists, moral philosophers and historians alike, not to mention the 'scientists of revolution'. If historical truth is characterised as a matter of pure interpretation and subjectivity, we will end up foreclosing the very possibility of conversation.

What caused me to shift from rebellion to reconciliation or perhaps from strife to reflection? Maybe I should frame this differently, because 'conciliation' is often used as a euphemism for compromises that perpetuate systemic injustice and brutality. The transition that I have

undergone can better be described as a move from a nihilistic rejection of social reality to a critical dialogue with it; from the politics of violent 'overthrow' and 'seizure of power', to the politics of non-violent resistance and transformation. It is not often realised how powerful and widespread the attractions of extremism can be. The more radical the rhetoric, the greater, supposedly, is one's commitment to the public good; the more violent the suggested solution, the more admirable the character of its proponent. Not for nothing has E.J. Hobsbawm named the twentieth century the "age of extremes". Radical discourse of all hues has been characterised by the assumption of a violently adversarial stance, of fierce polemic in the Left tradition (*polemos* incidentally, means strife in Greek), personal attacks on doctrinal opponents, the reduction of reason to dogma, a disdain for moderation and above all, a glorification of violence in the form of the warrior cult.

Let us approach the matter via a slight diversion. If asked for a summary definition of communal politics, I would say that it is a project for the militarisation of civil society. The stamina that this politics possesses denotes nothing less than the lasting impact and legacy of fascism. It should not surprise us that Hitler and Nazism still carry a positive charge for many literati in India. I think the militarist nationalism of Subhas Bose is part of the explanation for this. Evidently, the utilitarian ethic denoted by the phrase "the end justifies the means" has sunk deep roots in Indian politics and casts its baleful effect on Left and Right alike. Unfortunately, the ultra-left programme of 'people's war' feeds into the same mentality. It is significant that on the whole, the ultra-left and the ultra-right avoid confrontation with one another. It would appear that their shared hate-object is Mahatma Gandhi and their common project the destruction of constitutional democracy. Is it not interesting that contemporary 'public sentiment' – that ever-handy tool of hateful mobilisation – finds criticism of Subhas Bose or Shivaji or V.D. Savarkar intolerable, but has put up with a decades-long glorification of Gandhiji's assassins? I wonder how many of us appreciate that it is Gandhi whom we have to thank for the intellectual freedom to abuse him.

The period that we were 'underground', saw momentous happenings in the sub-continent. From 1971 onwards it became clear that the cut and dried formulations of Indian Maoism would not work. The revered Chairman Mao shook hands with "war-criminal" Kissinger as Vietnam

continued to be bombed. The JVP insurrection in Sri Lanka was smashed by the Bandaranaike government which enjoyed moral support from India as well as Pakistan, the US, China and the USSR. The Pakistan army refused to honour the results of the general election that had given the Awami League an absolute majority, and launched a brutal military crackdown in East Pakistan, with the full logistic and political backing of the Chinese government. Millions of poverty-stricken refugees flowed into West Bengal.

These happenings threw the Naxalite movement into confusion. At a personal level, I initially persisted in my loyalty to the Chinese version of events, which included blaming the Indian government and the USSR for the crisis in Pakistan. However, along with some of my comrades, I soon became acutely distressed by the sheer cynicism of the Chinese Communist Party. Why, I asked myself, could not the Chinese press even inform the Chinese public of what the Pakistani army was up to? Was not China a socialist country, a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'? Did not the Chinese workers have the right to know what was being done with the guns and ammunition that their government was exporting to Pakistan? Those who imagine that the 'degeneration' of Chinese communism happened only after the passage of Chairman Mao could enlighten themselves by reading Zhou Enlai's letter to Yahya Khan in April 1971, after he had begun the slaughter of innocents. The events of 1971 marked the advent of permanent ideological disarray in the ultra-left movement, something that is reflected till this day in the bitter and often violent factionalism that surrounds extremist politics. It was similar to the disruption caused by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956. It bears reflection that the communist movement has been riven for decades with issues of democracy, the freedom of thought (even within the ranks) and bureaucratism.

As far as I was concerned, these events were the last straw. My faith in the leadership of the Indian and international revolution was shaken. A close relative, who had also been a left-wing radical in his student days, helped me recognise the ruthless pragmatism of the Chinese Communist Party. It was clear even then, that they were motivated by nationalism and great-power ambition, rather than world revolution. They had the blood of innocents on their hands. When the very ethical ground of a powerful commitment shifts beneath the feet of the foot-soldier, it causes a collapse of morale. The loss of moral value made me lose the belief that

the revolutionary project was feasible at all, and that the persons leading it had any ethical or even practical sense of what they were doing. In late 1971, I met my father for the first time since I had gone underground, and he offered to help me extricate myself. I must say the step away from violent revolution was deeply disturbing for me, perhaps more so than the step towards it. I knew I could remain 'UG" for an indefinite period. Indian society is an ocean of humanity, and those who got caught did so (mainly) due to a loss of nerve. Could I not simply melt into the masses and live out my refusal? After all, I had not been apprehended by the police. However, something also told me that something of the rebel would remain in me for life anyway, and that it would be better for me and my family if I drew back from an extreme posture into a more moderate way of life and resistance. I know I did the right thing – I would have suffered a loss of mental balance had I remained in a movement that was disintegrating. There is a touch of the suicidal in extremist politics, hence it is not surprising that the most tortured souls in its ranks end up as 'martyrs'. I could not see myself a martyr – maybe that is what saved me. But it was all very painful. And I will not deny that my father's status as a well-known educationist made the transition easier than it was for many of my comrades.

What made me rethink the nature of left-radicalism was a conversation that, along with some close friends, I shared with E.P. Thompson in 1976. (He has mentioned this meeting in his book, *Writings by Candlelight*). It was the year of the Emergency, when we were forced to think about things we had hitherto taken for granted. What made an indelible impact was his observation that the use of the derisive prefix 'bourgeois' before 'democracy' was the most self-defeating discursive practice of communists the world over. Democracy, said Thompson, was a hard-won institutional gain of working people, and in our case, of the national movement. Preserving it was absolutely crucial for socialists. Talking to this great historian made me realise the complex and tragic nature of the communist relationship with democracy, which has resulted in the unnecessary juxtaposition of political to socio-economic liberty.

Years later, when I began teaching an optional paper on Soviet history, I had the opportunity to study this question in some detail. It was a fascinating exercise. All that I can say here is that it was a relief to discover that there is not a single liberal-democratic criticism of Soviet authoritarian tendencies, including matters related to press censorship, intellectual

freedom or state-controlled trade unions, that was not articulated forcefully by one or other group or leader within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It is a tragedy that critics were considered heretics, and that few in the Left bother to study the ideas of Trotsky, Bukharin, Mirza Sultan- Galiev or Preobazhensky. The habit of treating criticism as heresy, is of course, a direct outcome of the notion that the Party is always right, and that it possesses the absolute truth. This church-like approach to ideas is the issue that has troubled me the most and propelled me in an alternative political direction.

Some years later Delhi University taught me another lesson. Ramjas College was a place that we hesitated to intrude into even as campus revolutionaries. Maybe it was nemesis for me to be selected to join the History Department there in August 1974. I served for twenty years, taking voluntary retirement in 1994, a time more turbulent than my student years and with the underground. I have never experienced such physical pain as I did in 1982, nor such prolonged anxiety as in the years 1981-90. During this time I felt compelled to undertake two hunger strikes, the first in 1981, the second in 1990. It is a long and tedious tale that I shall summarise. My activity was part of an ongoing democratic campaign by students, teachers and karamcharis in Ramjas, something that I did not initiate, but joined. If this account appears self-regarding, it is because I am describing the impact of these events on my personal development, which is the purpose of this essay.

Upon return from three years of study leave, I went on a hunger-strike in October 1981 in order to obtain the salary of Sita Ram, the head *mali*, who had been wrongfully denied it without an inquiry. The backdrop of this series of events was an Emergency-like regime in the college, grave allegations of corruption in the college administration and deep divisions among the teachers, one faction backing the Principal. I took the step after strenuous efforts to secure a just procedure had been scornfully turned down. After a nine-day strike, supported by the DU Karamchari Union and in which I was joined by two colleagues from Ramjas and one from the Sri Ram College of Commerce, we decided to lift it, and pursue the struggle by other means.

The atmosphere in Ramjas remained extremely tense, and there was a fracas in the Staff Council in February 1982. Later that month, my scooter was intercepted near Qudsia Park by six young men who had followed me

in a car all the way from home. I was beaten severely with iron rods, my left leg broken in two places and the upper part of my jaw permanently damaged, with five teeth lost. But for my helmet, I might have suffered severe skull injuries too. I was left on the road to be picked up by a couple in a Fiat and taken to Bara Hindu Rao Hospital, on the Ridge. (Despite my best efforts, I never managed to thank them – let me do so now, 24 years later). University colleagues and friends soon turned up and later that day I was taken to the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences. A big agitation followed and many students and teachers from all over the campus joined to force the college governing body to suspend the Principal. On medical advice, I was removed to Bombay for surgery, and needed nine weeks to walk again.

My parents, close friends and I were traumatised. I was disturbed to find certain elements in the academic community boasting about having taught me a lesson. We knew who had instigated and carried out the deed but could not prove it in court. In fact, when I was finally summoned as chief witness, the magistrate treated me as if I were a defendant, rather than the victim of a criminal assault. Meanwhile, I returned to work in October 1982, and found myself accused of having rioted outside the Principal's house, and thus an undertrial, along with three *karamcharis*. This trial continued for seven years. I must say I have had extensive experience of the venality and unpredictability of India's system of criminal justice. Not to mention the sweet-smelling corridors of Tees Hazari Courts. One of my close friends, who is a practising lawyer, calls it a casino. I belong to a privileged stratum of Indian society. I shudder to think of what less fortunate citizens must face when they seek justice.

But more than the issue of Indian justice, the episode literally forced me to think about the politics of violence. I cannot deny that the pain and anguish, not to mention the gloating behaviour of those who believed I needed a lesson, filled me with rage and the desire for retribution. Some of the students who used to crowd around my bedside in AIIMS would tell me to forget my commitment to non-violence and just indicate that the guilty be punished. Quite apart from the complicated problem of determining guilt in episodes of this kind, I knew intuitively that any violent reaction from the side of those struggling for a democratic college administration in Ramjas would undermine the politics of the movement, for, after all, politics is the application of ethics to public life. I realised that violence

was not merely something we do to our opponents. It is something we do to ourselves, and at great cost.

At yet another level, I found myself thinking about the sheer enormity of what had happened. If I felt so traumatised and humiliated by this brutal physical assault, how could I cause it to happen to others? And if it left such a deep mark on my character and thought-processes, which could have gone either way, would it not be reprehensible for me to make light of such irrevocable deeds, and that too, in the name of some 'higher' morality? Today it should be clear that it is not merely the state and the established order that perpetrates violence on defenceless people. Self-styled revolutionaries, freedom fighters and the patriarchs sitting on caste-panchayats also cause a great deal of suffering. We may argue interminably as to who began it, and whose contribution is the greater. Such arguments will not be of any use to, say, the children killed in an Independence Day function in Assam last year, or the 40 or more bus passengers killed in a Maoist land mine in Nepal in June 2005. My roadside experience 23 years ago motivated me to give this issue the seriousness it deserves.

The other major event for me, as for many of my generation, was the growing communal atmosphere in the early 1980s, culminating in Operation Blue Star in Amritsar, the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, followed by the carnage of Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere. We had heard of mass communal killings from our parents, but we had not witnessed anything on such a scale in our time. I observed frenzied crowds on the rampage, Sikh taxi drivers weeping in fear and humiliation, gurudwaras on fire. To my dismay, I heard of some Delhi University students participating in the violence, and some teachers speak approvingly of it. I had occasion to participate in a rescue operation in the Trilokpuri area, where a young widow was hiding with her two small children and mother after her father and her husband had been burnt alive. When my colleague Nitya and I, accompanied by a constable, climbed the stairs in the burnt-out house to approach the *barsati*, the infant girl in her mother's arms saw the policeman's lathi and burst into tears, whimpering, *meri mummy ko mat maaro* (please don't hit my mother). I was shaken and deeply moved by the plight of these people, reduced to refugee status in their own city, *mohalla* and home.

The events of 1984 convinced me that communalism is India's staggered form of fascism, resistance to which is the fulcrum for the

preservation of democracy. The very idea of truth was sorely tested in the storm of political allegations and counter-allegations that followed: Who was responsible for the carnage? Was it systematic or 'spontaneous'? Was this or that Congress heavyweight involved? Observing a High Court Justice disposing contemptuously a petition by the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights asking for police cognisance of the crimes was another Orwellian nightmare. After 1984, we cannot comfort ourselves with the thought that 'respectable' people don't do such things. Confronted by riots in 1946, Gandhi said, "I deprecate the habit of procuring a moral alibi for ourselves by blaming it all on the goondas. We always put the blame on goondas. But it is we who are responsible for their creation as well as encouragement".

After Gujarat 2002, can we doubt that vast sections of India's middle classes and establishment are steeped in communal prejudice to the point of approving of mass brutality? They disapprove of Naxalite violence, but murder in the name of 'patriotism' and the 'honour of the community' has almost become chic. Advani might well issue a posthumous certificate of secularism to Jinnah, but we will have to wait a long time to hear him utter any remorse for the cruelties committed in Gujarat in 2002 by his proteges. I quote Gandhi again, this time at the height of the violence of 1947, when he said, "it is time for peace-loving citizens to assert themselves and isolate goondaism. Non-violent non-cooperation is the universal remedy. Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living in and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives it is withdrawn..."

The changes in my political outlook and the circumstances that prompted those changes must be placed in the context of the core issues of democracy, authoritarianism and violence. Democracy is not the name of a social system. It is a principle of association. A democratic constitution is an institutional arena wherein social conflicts are enacted in an unstable equilibrium. The tension is relentless. The growth of democracy implies popular control of daily life and at the workplace. The decay of democracy results from the action of vested interests that use patriarchy, caste and intimidation to depress wages, avoid the construction of social security systems and undermine modern citizenship. Democratic institutions are inconvenient for those who benefit from conventional forms of social oppression – Indian women and the stigmatised castes and tribes are the worst victims of this system. This situation forms the backdrop

for our version of authoritarian politics. It has been present since the advent of democratic movements in India, and has had major successes, most notably, the communal Partition. Authoritarianism operates in all segments of the political spectrum. Yet it is *not* politically neutral. The organisation of violence is the beginning of a process that merges authoritarianism across the political spectrum, even when it appears otherwise.

Any serious social-democratic programme must affirm fundamental respect for human life, and place on its agenda society's determination to liberate itself from fear. Violence is both the expression and the symptom of social and political crisis. We need to debate its roots, forms and functions, in order to cast fresh light on the iniquitous relations between the sexes, castes and classes, and on the structured violence of the global polity. If I have learned anything of significance about politics, it is this: to question what is known as 'commonsense' is our primary responsibility as human beings. Such questioning and curiosity alone has enabled us to survive. Change, growth and transformation are in the nature of life. We all experience them. What differs is the manner in which they happen, the choices they offer us and the ones we opt for. I learned my most important lessons the hard way, especially the ones about love, truth and non-violence. I am well aware that others pay a much higher price every day.

It has been a long time! Some of my contemporaries will sense nothing but irony in what I have written. And yet, in its pre-political usage, *revolution* signified the completion of a circular rotation. The ironies of language do no more than reflect the ironies of life. To the persons whom I caused grief during those eventful years, I can only offer my deepest apologies and regrets. That aside, most of what I have described transpired outside the walls of St Stephen's College. But howsoever odd it may sound today, that is where it all began.

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Our Fractured Conscience

From militant communalists and nationalists to those who kill for the sake of 'people' or 'historical destiny', too many of us believe in the death penalty.

Is it of the very essence of truth to be impotent and of the very essence of power to be deceitful? And what kind of reality does truth possess if it is powerless in the public realm? – Hannah Arendt, in *Truth and Politics*

Public opinion is now debating the death penalty awarded to Afzal Guru in connection with the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament. The debate is becoming a shouting match but is an opportunity for us to think about the phenomenon of virtuous murder, of which judicial executions no less than political killings are a part.

A certain line of thinking places the roots of political violence in poverty and backwardness. A greater part of the explanation may lie in the experience of humiliation. The idea of justice is rooted in the sense of fairness. Unfair treatment gives rise to anger, which shifts towards revenge when it finds no redress. Fairness requires that wrongdoings be acknowledged. If the wrongdoers do not accept they have done wrong, society may render such acknowledgement to the victims. When even this is not forthcoming, violent emotions and deeds become probable. Such deeds are seen as crimes by one side and as justice by the other. When your anguish is greeted by silence, you want to make an explosive noise. Bhagat Singh's bomb in the Legislative Assembly was meant to "make the deaf hear". (The risk associated with loud noise is deafness on all sides). Where communities are pitted against each other, we enter the dark portals

of collective guilt, innocent victims and faceless avengers, of killing as a means of obtaining recompense.

Consider that other ageless phenomenon – the double-standard. Humans have been sensitive to the terrible burden that killing imposes upon us. Hence, we have always asked the Almighty to salve our consciences. Our ambivalence is exemplified in the ancient Judaeo-Christian debate on the Sixth Commandment: *Thou Shalt Not Kill*. Did God mean *Thou Shalt Not Murder*? Pacifist Christians insist upon the first meaning. Crusading Christians require the second. A current of thought in India has named Gandhi's assassination Gandhi-*vadh*, rather than *hatya*. Godse considered his act to be an act of justice. Undoubtedly V.D. Savarkar (whose portrait adorns the halls of Parliament) thought so too. What ideals do our leaders wish to uphold by honouring a chief accused in the Gandhi murder trial?

Afzal didn't kill anyone. If he may be hanged for enabling the attack on Parliament, is there not prima-facie evidence of politicians and policemen enabling carnages in Delhi and Gujarat in 1984 and 2002? How many of them have been brought to justice? The handful of convicts are underprivileged persons – the big fish are flourishing. In 1987 over forty Muslims of Meerut were allegedly murdered by the Armed Constabulary. The case took eighteen years to come to court, with delaying tactics resorted to even by parties that claim to defend minority rights. Sometimes the phrase "rule of law" sounds farcical. The Indian establishment has regularly suborned the justice system to protect a certain class of criminal. Policemen in dereliction of duty end up with promotions and enablers of mass murder get hailed as heroes. Why is this contempt for human life any less culpable than the attack on Parliament?

In modern times, devotion to great causes has acquired a quasi-religious fervour, even when the devotees use secular language. Albert Camus named our time the age of *historical murder.* These habits of mind cut across the political spectrum. Our tradition of militancy includes crusades for self-determination and people's wars for classless society. In August 2000, nearly hundred people were killed in eight massacres in Kashmir. They included Amarnath pilgrims and some members of a Kashmiri Muslim family. Most of them were brickkiln workers from central India and Bihar. (Revolutionaries are not very exercised at the annihilation of workers by *jehadis* of either Muslim or Hindu variety).

On August 13, 2004, nine school children were killed by the ULFA in Upper Assam. On August 15, the CPI-Maoist shot dead nine persons in Andhra Pradesh, including a legislator, his son, driver and a municipal employee. On September 12, 2005 it slit the throats of seventeen villagers in Giridih (Jharkhand). This February saw twenty-five tribals dead in a landmine blast in Chhattisgarh. Another blast on March 25 killed thirteen persons. The Maoists apologised for the latter, calling it a mistake. It is such 'mistakes' that motivate opponents of the death penalty to demand its abolition. There were no apologies for sixty people killed in Delhi's Sarojini Nagar on October 29, 2005. Nor for the two hundred dead and six hundred and twenty-five injured in Mumbai this July.

Every act of violence leaves a lifetime of trauma for its victims, some of whom become avengers in turn. But one senses irony when sympathisers of militancy ask for a revocation of the death penalty. Do they oppose it in principle or only when one of their own is sentenced to death? Why are they silent when militants administer death sentences to all and sundry? Does it make any sense to attach political threats to appeals for clemency? And can the Hindu nationalists understand how the well-wishers of Graham Staines feel when they see Dara Singh celebrated as a hero?

The list is endless. The Salwa Judum vigilantes of Chhattisgarh have allegedly committed rapes and killings. A recent citizen's report documented the vicious activities of this state-supported militia, but it also noted the Maoists' brutality. Like their opponents they too kill without presumption of innocence or chance for appeals for mercy. The comrades should think about the impact of their activities have upon the grand ideal of socialism. They reject the legitimacy of the Indian state, but their own political behaviour is highly autocratic. Should socialists hold themselves to a higher or a lower standard than the system they criticise? Tragically, those who wanted to prepare the soil for a just society have now become judge and executioner rolled into one – a pure version of tyranny. Along with right-wing radicals, their own legitimacy is grounded in nothing more substantial than outraged sentiment and a claim to superior understanding of Indian reality. Does this give them the right to kill anyone they want? India's ruling elites as well their critics are playing host to a nihilist element that grows more confident the longer the democratic conscience clings to its double standard on political murder. The concept of 'collateral damage' is not confined to George Bush's dictionary.

Our radicals have changed the world for the worse. From militant communalists and nationalists to those who kill for the sake of 'people' or 'historical Destiny', too many of us believe in the death penalty. Those demanding death for Afzal are mobilising relatives of the dead policemen. The families deserve our sympathy but in any case Afzal is due for life imprisonment. What good will it do to end his life? Policemen may now sympathise with the families of two other murder victims, Jessica Lal and Nitish Katara both of whom have seen their hopes for justice dashed to the ground. The main suspects in these cases are relatives of Congressmen. Jessica was shot in clear view of the high and mighty. Do those in charge of our criminal justice system possess a clean conscience when it comes to restitution for the victims of killers? Restraint and compassion are the best means by which to contain the rising tide of political violence. For a system with so much blood on its hands, the hanging of Mohammad Afzal Guru would be yet another example of its breathtaking hypocrisy.

Speak the truth
Stop the killing

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Wrestling with Gandhi – a personal account

In the end, he had the last laugh. He's been dead for so long, you wouldn't think it.

It is unwise to speak for large numbers of people, as if one knew what they thought or believed at a certain point in time. So it is with hesitation that I presume to use the word *we*, even when the people I refer to are a small segment of radical intelligentsia four decades ago. Still, I must use it. It was not just me who was wrestling with the old man whom the superstitious and opiated populace chose to call the Mahatma. *We* were. As a callow youth infuriated with the degradation of the Indian polity, the destitution of its toiling masses and determined to find someone to blame for it all, I acquired the then prevalent Pavlovian reflex. It was all because of Gandhi, obviously. Wasn't he always available to sabotage militant mass movements when the people took matters in their own hands? A politician who tried to pass off as a sadhu. Someone who stayed in G.D. Birla's palatial mansions and pretended to be austere. His very austerity was a costly performance, didn't everyone know how much it cost to keep him supplied with goat's milk? Yes, it was Gandhi with his dogma of non-violence, his religious beliefs and catchwords such as Ramrajya who led the gullible Indian people into the perdition of partition and semi-colonialism.

I have described the broader context of my political journey elsewhere, so I will try not to burden this essay with repetitive details. Suffice it to say that along with a handful of friends, I participated in the revolutionary

movement known as Naxalism in its first phase, in the period 1968-72. It is only an apparent irony that we who believed in violent revolution were so obsessed with the man whose very name was identified with ahimsa. Many were indifferent, but we couldn't afford to be. As young man I treated Gandhi's pacifism with contempt – young men in particular are prone to associating violence with masculinity and non-violence with weakness.

The idea that ahimsa could represent courage was completely alien to us. And so we were only too ready to accept the Party line on Gandhi. Obsessed with the strategic approach to violence as the dividing line between revolution and counter-revolution, the leaders of the extreme-left treated the Gandhian tradition as an obstacle to revolution. A great deal of venom was vented in an effort to demolish him. Here are some phrases randomly chosen from an article written (probably) by the legendary comrade Saroj Datta:

> *that despicable tool of imperialism – Gandhi…*
> *the entire life of this vile man was one long inglorious career of devoted service to imperialism…*
> *tried to disarm the Indian people with his spurious theory of non-violence*
> *whose lechery and sexual depravity passed off as brahmacharya…*
> *revolutionary students have flung his poisonous works into the fire…*

The old Naxalite slogan *Make the Seventies the Decade of Liberation* sounds distant and hollow now, despite the fact that a Maoist movement still exists in India, and that its sympathisers remain convinced that it hovers on the brink of historic victory (as indeed we were convinced, four decades ago). For all that, we cannot pretend that the Indian people have taken to the politics of 'people's war', or – despite the atrocities committed by the ruling establishment – have rejected the ideals of consensual democracy.

As an aside I must say that the habit of using Gandhi as the ever-available whipping boy for all the ills of contemporary India was not confined to intellectuals of radical left-wing persuasion. In my early days as a teacher in the University of Delhi, the phenomenon of the student fracas was commonplace – more so than nowadays, I'm sure. In one such commotion in the Law Faculty, a senior university official was made to suffer some embarrassing moments. Thereupon he caused an inquiry to

be set up, to be headed by a retired judge, already made famous by his investigations into prurience in Indian cinema and the disappearance of a famous national leader.

After a few months of studying the causes of student unrest – as per his brief – he came to the thoughtful conclusion that Mahatma Gandhi was the root of it all. His call to students to join politics in the 1920's was the starting point of the ongoing perversions of youthful ambition. Students had to leave all that behind them now, opined the hon'ble judge, and concentrate on their studies again. Etc, etc. I recall being bemused by this exercise of the judicial intellect, not to mention the surreal nature of the projects upon which university funds could be spent.

It was not so much the failures of the revolutionary movement as the growth of communal hatred that brought home to me the continuing relevance of Gandhi's life and the manner in which he left it. In a demonstration I joined on the fateful day of November 1, 1984, as carnage against Sikhs unfolded across Delhi, I remember having an emotive argument with a close friend about the strident attitude with which we had embraced politics in our youth. Why can we not be moderate in our language and our goals? he had asked. What is the point of telling working people to take up arms against the state when they seem more responsive to calls to kill each other?

The bitter experiences of 1984 convinced me that communal politics was the Indian version of fascism, and that combating it was essential to any truly democratic politics. Some of us set up the Sampradayikta Virodhi Andolan (SVA) to demand justice for the victims and to struggle against the growth of communal politics. I remember a street play being staged by some comrades in 1989, where there were also some revolutionary pamphlets for sale. One of them was a vitriolic essay on Gandhi by a leftist Hindi writer whose diatribe ended with fulsome praise for Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse. To the credit of the organisers of the street play, they withdrew this pamphlet when I drew their attention to it.

But the incident awakened me to the disconcerting potential similarities which attend doctrines of violent political change. The radical left in India has still not come to terms with Gandhi, (a lacuna that runs parallel to a failure to theorise the question of violence), but the rapid growth of communalism in the 1980's and 90's has certainly alerted it to his sacrifices for the cause of communal harmony. This realisation

culminated in a demonstration in Delhi on Gandhi's death anniversary in January 1993.

Jean Paul Sartre said of Marxism that it was the 'unsurpassable horizon of our time'. As long as capitalism remained, so long would Marx's critique of it remain fundamental to the politics of resistance. For too long however, have western philosophical critics of modernity (with honourable exceptions) passed over the question of political killing (or shall we name it, with Albert Camus, *historical murder*) in silence. For too long have they pretended not to notice that, amidst the carnage of the twentieth century, there was a man whom many humble people considered great, for the very reason that he steadfastly rejected violence as a means of resistance, and (by example more than speech), laid the ethical foundations for a consensual and liberal democracy in India. There are certain ideologies that place their adherents beyond ordinary standards of ethical conduct; as if to say that their good intentions render their actions beyond good and evil. To my mind, this mode of thinking is a recipe not for human liberation, but for eternal strife. As long as we live with violence as the substratum of iniquitous socio-economic relations, the Gandhian ideals of truth and ahimsa will remain the unsurpassable horizon for the conduct of a democratic politics.

I have extracted some sentences for this essay from those of my previously written articles that have bearing on its subject matter; in particular from *The Futility of Common Sense*, in Rukmini Sekhar (ed), *Making a Difference*, Spic-Macay, New Delhi, 1998; and Rebellion to Reconciliation; in B.G. Verghese (ed); *Tomorrow's India: Another Tryst with Destiny*; Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2006.

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NOV 21, 2007, THE TELEGRAPH

The Religion of Force

Nandigram has shown that democracy cannot survive in a culture of militarism and violence

> "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world" – Hannah Arendt

After the Nandigram confrontation over land acquisition by the state in West Bengal, the most important concern in political debate ought to be the issue of violence – legitimate, illegitimate, formal and informal. I doubt whether this debate will take place, because the ground shared by enemies is embarrassing for everyone and by mutual consent, remains unspeakable. Still, certain disquieting facts stare us in the face. Avoiding their implications will take us yet again to the zone where we focus on "who started it" – an infinite sequential regression that explains nothing and satisfies no one.

Political violence is always ugly, but thus far, the state has held the monopoly on legitimate force. The more a state relies on outright force, the more brittle and shaky its hegemony. This is true for empires such as the British, the Soviet and the American, as well as for national regimes. A connected issue is the maintenance of 'irregulars' or vigilantes. These political paramilitaries (not to be confused with the state's paramilitary apparatus) represent the stabilisation of informal violence; and their deployment is a grave symptom of the decline of state legitimacy.

The opposition cannot deny that number of supporters of the CPI

(M) in Nandigram were forced to leave their villages. It is an abuse of democracy to engage in armed confrontations and force one's opponents to vacate their homes. Certain parties intervened there more with the motive of augmenting their political standing than to fulfil popular aspirations. However, on the issue of land-acquisition, democratic norms demanded that the villagers be consulted prior to making plans for their eviction. With the outbreak of conflict, the government was bound to maintain peace whilst looking for a solution. Instead, there were cases of intimidation, leading to the alienation even of left-wing cadre. The matter was compounded in March, when the police confronted the opposition with the help of an informal militia.

This use of an extra-constitutional force was illegal. The government is entitled to use legitimate force to maintain civic peace. It does not have the right to dispatch anonymous armed men to thrash its opponents. But this is exactly what it did. The second week of November saw a blatantly partisan administration neutralise the police and give free rein to vigilante groups. All constituents of the government bear responsibility for this. Arson and murder have taken place. Now that rape cases have been registered, the comrades in government could ask themselves whether this is a price worth paying for the 'new sunrise' in Nandigram. Is rape, too, a coin that needs to circulate?

There is a long-standing fascination with militarism in Indian politics. Savarkar's favourite slogan was 'Militarise Hindu-dom!' Freedom fighters saw themselves as an Army, Netaji Subhas was drawn towards uniforms and military dictators. The RSS has maintained itself in paramilitary format since its inception, and the communist tradition has tended to glorify 'People's War'. Two decades ago, the Khalistanis organised 'commando forces', and took titles such as 'Lt General'. Islamist guerillas see themselves as warriors of the Almighty. The North East is teeming with generalissimos. A more immediate kind of informal violence has appeared in landlord armies such as the Ranvir Sena, and groups such as Chhattisgarh's Salwa Judum. We could call it 'security outsourcing' in today's managerial jargon.

There are distinctions to be made among such paramilitaries. Some are inspired by heavenly or historical goals, others have more prosaic ends. Some are ideological, others pragmatic. Our upper-caste establishment refers to Jehadis and Naxalites as 'terrorists'; but doesn't see the Bajrang

Dal or Shiv Sena that way. They're only 'ultra-nationalists'. It objects to the violence and lawlessness practiced by the former, but winks at mass-murder and revenge-attacks by its own vigilantes, as in 1984 and 2002. Often political violence is enacted in the name of the oppressed – those who espouse it like to appear as the injured party, even when they are chief ministers. A binary division in the political ethos takes place, wherein we are moved to tears by the plight of our preferred victims, but impervious to the suffering inflicted on others by 'our' side. This gives rise to surreal spectacles such as L.K. Advani's declaration of never having witnessed such barbarity as he saw in Nandigram. Indeed. The victims of his cohorts in Gujarat still await the smallest gesture of human sympathy from this statesman, whose trip to West Bengal was unhampered by the administration, unlike Medha Patkar's movements. Some citizens are more equal than others. Yes, we all make distinctions of one type or another.

But there remain some things in common between these formations. They all look upon and wish to convert civil society into a war zone. Their emotional universe is peopled by warriors and martyrs, and history for them is a long march of dead heroes. War is glorious, and bloodshed brings out the best in man. I submit that the best is close to the worst. One symptom of the mental disorder called sociopathy, is the absence of pity. It is a sad feature of India's political life that so many sociopaths have found their way to its commanding heights. And they are no less diseased who possess the capacity to order brutality from afar, but never get blood on their own hands.

During the Cold War, it was a commonplace that democracy and socialism were antithetical to each other. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, it has become clear that it is precisely capitalism that cannot co-exist with democracy. And as one gives way to the other, attacks on democracy will increase. The SEZ policy is an example of the suspension of constitutional rights, already battered by religious fanatics and imperialists. Evidently, capitalism can manipulate every form of social oppression, from gender inequity to caste and race, as a means of enforcing a congenial environment for itself. Capitalist development will never terminate social injustice, rather, it will feed upon and perpetuate it in hybrid forms. Extra-economic coercion is the social capital of modernity.

Meanwhile, instead of defending what freedoms we have, the so-called people's warriors abet the above process by attacking democracy

in the name of a unilateral claim to represent peoples' interests. May one expect the freedom of speech in their liberated areas? This October, the Maoist party murdered 18 persons in Jharkhand. Did their victims have the opportunity to plead for mercy? It verges on the surreal when executioners demand democratic rights. Theirs is another kind of suspension of politics and of socialist ethics. Ironically their programme calls for yet more capitalism, on the argument that the capitalism we already have is not the genuine variety. In a certain mental universe, all we may look forward to is one or other brand of communist-administered capitalism. Maybe more people will turn to God for assistance.

Democracy can only survive if democratic freedoms are valued and extended to the home and workplace. This cannot be done via the culture of militarism and violence. As Gandhi said in 1909, what is obtained through fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts. The comrades who wrought the new sunrise in Nandigram have lots of work ahead.

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APRIL 28, 2008, HINDUSTAN TIMES,

Stemming the Rot

The State must not sub-contract its sovereign control over legitimate force to a private vigilante group which functions with impunity

The Supreme Court's March 31 observations on the armed group 'Salwa Judum' impacts not only the state of Chhattisgarh where this group operates but poses questions to major actors across the political spectrum. Admitting two public interest petitions on the matter, Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan asked the respondent, "How can the State give arms to some persons? The State will be abetting in a crime if these private persons kill others." This observation contains a profound and much-evaded truth about our polity. It also has ramifications for a long-due process of reform in India's fast-eroding criminal justice system. If the state of Chhattisgarh persists in a strategy that the Court has prima-facie perceived to be an illegality, it will only be following several nasty precedents that point towards the criminalisation of the State.

The Union of India, represented here by the State of Chhattisgarh, has illegally sub-contracted its sovereign control over legitimate force to a private vigilante group which functions with impunity. The Salwa Judum has the backing of the BJP and Congress and has been accused of committing punitive rapes and killings. The policy of rewarding its cadres for killing Naxalites has encouraged false encounters. This brutal campaign has undermined the legitimacy and reputation, not only of the government of the day, but of the Indian Union. Chhattisgarh has claimed that the Salwa Judum is a Gandhian campaign. This is a strange

description of men armed with guns, axes, bows and arrows.

Citizen's enquiries and the National Commission for Women have concluded that the lawless conduct of the Salwa Judum has led to a spiral of violent retribution, resulting in a civil war amongst the tribal population. In joint raids carried out by the Salwa Judum and the security forces, suspected "Naxalite sympathisers" (mostly old persons and small children who cannot run away) have been murdered, their houses torched, and livestock looted. In several instances, the raids have continued until all the villagers moved into camps. Its atrocities are rarely registered, marking an extension of impunity to an extra-legal force. Up to January 2007, 4,048 special police officers (SPOs) had been appointed under the Chhattisgarh Police Regulations. These Salwa Judum activists are given weapons training by security forces under an official plan to create a paramilitary structure parallel to that of the Naxalites. The SPOs are mostly unemployed tribal youth and minors. The appointment of minors as security personnel is a violation of constitutional clauses (Article 39) that protect the lives and dignity of children; and of the Child Labour Act (1986) that forbids the employment of children in hazardous activities. The government has also violated UN conventions on the rights of children, and thus rendered India vulnerable to international reprimand.

In January 2007, over 47,000 persons were living in so-called relief camps; and 644 out of 1,354 villages in Dantewada district were prey to their activities. Thousands have fled to neighbouring states. Clearly, the government sees enforced re-settlement as the best means of separating the revolutionaries from their environment. These methods were employed by the British in Malaya and by US forces in Vietnam. But India is a 60-year-old democracy, and the people being forced out of their homes are Indian citizens with equal rights under the law. They may work and live where they like, and their liberties may not be curtailed or taken away unless by due process of law. They are not criminals and cannot be held responsible for the rise of Naxalism, of which they are the victims, and for which the administration is answerable.

Chhattisgarh state has also enacted the Special Public Security Act (2005); that throttles legitimate dissent and other fundamental rights enshrined in Articles 14, 19 and 21. Civil rights activist Binayak Sen has been incarcerated under this Act. Along with its other actions related to the Salwa Judum, this measure violates Article 13, which forbids the State from

making any law, ordinance or regulation that "takes away or abridges" the fundamental rights of Indian citizens. Schedule V, which protects tribal areas, has also been violated. Is the Constitution being undermined by governments tied to industrialists and MNCs?

It is questionable whether draconian laws can be effectively regulated – the semi-permanent status of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in the North East is a glaring case of how emergencies can develop vested interests. We may expect the national security establishment to raise an outcry against the disbanding of the Salwa Judum. From their own standpoint, however, this policy will lead to the perpetuation of violence, stabilise rebellious attitudes and reduce public security. This might be a lucrative proposition for some, but its consequence will be to render destitute the poorest sections of the citizenry and drive them to desperation. It will also result in the erosion of the writ of law and the Constitution. We should consider whether the emergence of insurgencies with a support base amongst India's most deprived people has something to do with sheer mis-governance. Violent movements gain stature when directed at un-democratic governments.

The Union Home Minister wants special legislation to deal with extremism. Is it not true that our major political parties have indulged in terror-inducing activities in the past? That the process of justice in these cases has been tardy, to say the least? Dare we say that in certain cases, private armed groups and captive mobs have been hired by the state? The protection enjoyed by the Ranvir Sena and the Salwa Judum are examples. So was the vigilante action in Nandigram undertaken by political cadre associated with the West Bengal government. If our rulers believe that such activities will curtail insurgency, they are mistaken. The only way to protect the rule of law is to respect it. Disrespect for law by its guardians has already had disastrous results.

President Pratibha Patil has referred to mob violence as a result of the failure of Indian justice. Her Republic Day address spoke of "internal threats from Naxalism and terrorism", the former feeding upon "sentiments of discontentment in the undeveloped parts of the country". In Chhattisgarh, this discontent derives from the devastation of livelihoods for the benefit of corporate houses with an eye on mineral-rich tribal lands. The President noted that violent methods "had no place in a democracy". Surely this applies to all sides. A month later, she advised a seminar on

judicial reforms that the rise of mob violence was due to the "failure of the justice delivery system"; and stated that it was time to "collectively introspect on the causes of the ills of judicial administration without being unduly touchy and sensitive to criticism… we need to have in place a judicial machinery which is easily accessible and dispenses affordable and incorruptible justice to the people." Should not the entire administration pay serious attention to these observations by the Head of State? Contrary to the Prime Minister's assessment, it could be the criminal justice system that is the biggest security threat facing the country.

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JUNE 17, 2008, MAIL TODAY

Insult to Injury

We often come across the term 'judicial conscience'. Where exactly does this entity reside?

On June 13, I was reminded that the past never leaves us. The newspapers reported an 'HC clean chit' to the ex-Principal of Ramjas College, Delhi in the 26-year-old case of an assault on a lecturer named 'Dalip'. Since I was the person assaulted, I was deeply perturbed by this judgement. I had no idea that the state had approached the High Court. Where does this leave me, as a law-abiding citizen?

The bare facts are as follows. I joined the Ramjas History Department in 1974. In October 1981 I went on hunger-strike to obtain the salary of Sita Ram, the head mali, who had been wrongfully denied it without an inquiry. My actions were part of a campaign that I did not initiate. The backdrop was an autocratic regime, allegations of administrative corruption and divisions amongst teachers. Efforts to secure a just procedure had been scornfully turned down. After a nine-day strike joined by teachers from Ramjas and Shri Ram College of Commerce, we resolved to pursue the struggle by other means.

Ramjas remained extremely tense in the new year. On February 18, my scooter was intercepted near the Inter State Bus Terminal (ISBT) by six young men who had followed me in a car. I was beaten with iron rods, my left leg broken in two places and my upper jaw permanently damaged, with five teeth lost. But for my helmet, I might have suffered severe skull injuries. I was picked up by a kindly couple in a car and taken to Bara

Hindu Rao Hospital. The Vice Chancellor, colleagues and friends arrived, and that evening I was taken to AIIMS. The subsequent agitation brought about the Principal's suspension. I was removed to Bombay for surgery and needed nine weeks to walk again.

We knew who had instigated and carried out the deed, but the public prosecutor could prove nothing in court. When I appeared as a witness, the magistrate treated me as if I were the defendant rather than the victim of a crime. In acquitting the accused, he implied that I was using an opportunity to implicate certain persons on account of personal enmity. There was no curiosity as to how I came to be so grievously injured, or whether my injuries were compatible with a traffic accident. There was no effort to get at the truth.

The High Court judge observed that my failure to speak to the police "at the first opportunity" indicates that my statement was 'tutored', and hence he upholds the acquittal. How fair is this reasoning? Medical records will show that I lost five teeth, my upper jaw was damaged and my left leg broken in two places. I lay in Hindu Rao the entire day, during which time stitches were applied inside my mouth without anesthesia. I was unable to speak and needed pencil and paper to state my identity. Even the application of plaster took place after 10 pm. Owing to the severity of my condition, the police recorded my statement the following day: this was not my personal decision. Is this an adequate reason for the trial court and the honourable HC judge to impugn my honesty? Would it not have been reasonable to conclude that the delay in recording my statement was due to my medical condition?

The prosecution did not have the courtesy to inform me of the appeal in the HC. Surely as the victim I would have been most interested in pursuing the matter. Had it done so, I might have asked for representation, and prayed for the infirmities of the judgement to be overturned. The recent news report came as a bolt from the blue. And it is misleading, for I never accused the principal and physical training instructor of assaulting me. I only stated my suspicion of their being implicated in the assault. I had this intuition at the moment of the attack and have not altered it since. Of course, intuition is not evidence. But the investigation and framing of charges was the job of the police. Incidentally, in October 1982 I was introduced to my assailants in a police station. They said they had been misled and asked for forgiveness. One of them visited my house to ask me

not to give evidence.

The events of the 1980s had many repercussions. Teachers launched a campaign for democratic functioning. A movement against goondaism was undertaken by students. In 1988 I was elected to the university's Academic Council and chaired the DUTA Committee on Accountability. Our college became the first to set up a staff committee to maintain academic standards. All that energy was not expended in vain.

We often come across the term "judicial conscience". Where exactly does this entity reside? The CJI has observed that the judiciary is the ultimate defender of citizens' rights. Who will defend these rights if the courts fail us? One of the most twisted problems in legal theory is the assumed neutrality of judges. Not to mention the distinction between forensic and narrative versions of truth. What is the guarantee of this neutrality and how is it manifested? Truth is surely not a mere technical or formal detail. The idea of justice is antecedent to the emergence of constitutional systems or governments. Otherwise, we would not speak of natural law. But does justice reside exclusively in the utterances of courts? Law is the basis of an orderly society. It represents the need for a fair resolution of conflicts. Although democratic governments may exist only upon public approval, judges cannot be subject to the whims of electorates. What then can ensure that those entrusted with the care of justice will fulfil their charge? Ultimately the social contract is a historical gamble. It depends upon the alertness of the citizenry and a public ethos that respects the ideals that lie behind the phrase "the rule of law".

Homer's *Iliad* describes a dispute in a marketplace between two men over the blood-price for a victim of murder. The crowd asks the elders to arbitrate whilst they keep the antagonists in check. "Between them, on the ground lay two talents of gold, to be given to that judge who in this case spoke the straightest opinion". The public stands in judgement over the arbitrators. Here is a clue to the mystery of the judicial conscience. It is a circular thread that runs through all of society's constituents, the ones that are wise and the ones who accord them the status of being wise. There is no exclusive judge and no exclusive witness – all judge and are judged. When this thread is broken, we are on the brink of disintegration. The circle of public conscience points to the true meaning of law and judgement in a democratic society. The seat of law is not synonymous with the person occupying it, nor are judicial decisions always coterminous with justice. In

1982 I became the victim of a violent crime. But in the eyes of the justice system no one was guilty. All that it has done is to suggest that I made a 'tutored' accusation. The crime has now become invisible. I expect no recompense for that murderous assault on me 26 years ago. I still respect the law. I cannot say the same for those to whom I turned for justice.

This article, published in Mail Today on June 17, 2008, recounts my personal experience of justice in India. I am posting it in the hope that it will come to the notice of some hon'ble judges. Through my story I wish to show how the judicial system makes certain crimes invisible. If indeed there is one element that constitutes the 'greatest security threat' to the country, it is the criminal justice system. Someday society will pass judgement on judges.

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JULY 1, 2008, PRESENTATION TO FULBRIGHT-HAYES STUDY GROUP

Gandhi's Ahimsa: A Riposte to Modern Nihilism?

With his combination of gentleness and strength, the Mahatma challenged the bad faith of sectarian theology by placing non-violence in the political arena.

> *"It does not frighten me at all that the world seems to go in the opposite direction... when the moth approaches its doom it whirls round faster and faster until it is burnt up. It is possible that India will not escape this moth-like circling. It is my duty to try, till my last breath, to save India and through it the world from such a fate."*
> –Gandhi's letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, October 5, 1945.

Symptoms

The philosophical responses to capitalism, technology and modernity were always ambivalent. Marx and Nietzsche captured this ambivalence both within their philosophies and in their distinction from each other. In the twentieth century, Georges Sorel, Oswald Spengler, Ernst Junger and Martin Heidegger all represented this ambivalence in different ways. Despite his anarcho-syndicalism, Sorel was driven by a moralistic hatred of social decadence. His popularity amongst Bolsheviks as well as fascists, his attraction to the monarchist ultra-right group Action Francaise as well as to Lenin and Mussolini for attacking bourgeois democracy, exemplify the convergence towards which radical thought is driven by the phenomenon of political violence. Spengler advocated a mixture of socialism and authoritarianism similar to Junger's idea of Prussian Bolshevism. Although he was never anti-Semitic and ended up

being unpopular with the Nazis, Spengler was a messianic nationalist and sympathetic to Hitler. Junger was an aristocratic army officer and an acute conservative thinker who came to be known as an aesthete of war. He embraced technology better to overcome democracy. His impact on the evolution of his friend Heidegger is well-known, especially via the famous tract *Total Mobilisation* (1930) which was worker-ist and militarist simultaneously. Whereas Junger could be named a reactionary modernist, Heidegger was no modernist at all. His membership of the Nazi party, support for the war and silence over the genocide of European Jews are well-known. All these thinkers are representative of the nihilist mood of the early twentieth century.

Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* appeared in 1909, a year after Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*. But Gandhi's conservatism stood out from all of the above in his identification of non-violence as the crucial marker of positive politics. Whereas all of them ended up in a compromise with the rising swell of right-wing radicalism, Gandhi remained consistent both in his critique of modernity, as well as in his commitment to democracy and non-violence. The ambivalence of these critiques points towards a different way of thinking about the definition of Left and Right.

Definitions

If nihilism be defined with Nietzsche as the belief that the world, as it is, requires external justification; the belief in an extraneous source of value; and in the world's valuelessness. In which case all religious-minded persons are nihilists, along with a host of others who sought meaning but did not find it, or who believed in traditional categories of value but were horrified to discover that value had evaporated. Indeed, Nietzsche believes we are all of necessity bound to be nihilists, either consciously or unconsciously, and that humankind is destined to remain in this condition for the immediate future, measured in centuries.

This raises the question of truth. Nietzsche once defined truth as "a mobile army of metaphors", but he still wants to convince us that he knows the essence of the nihilism of unconscious nihilists better than they know themselves. At other places he hails scientific knowledge for making man equal to God – "it is all over with gods and priests if man becomes scientific" (Anti-Christ). And "truth has had to be fought for every

step of the way, almost everything else dear to our hearts... has had to be sacrificed to it... The service of truth is the hardest service." It appears that all of us including the greatest iconoclast of all, are doomed to seek truth. It is merely a question of whether the truth of contemporary nihilism will be known in time, or too late.

However, historicists (believers in a teleologically determined end of history) also derive their purposes, if not from an afterlife, from a future whose contours are known to them via an assumed superior knowledge of history. This imaginary state is distinguished from the ordinary optimism of lesser beings by virtue of an anticipatory self-exoneration from ethical standards. Historicism as a source of value encompasses the perspectives of imperialists, nationalists, communists and fascists, and places them (whether they be religious-minded or not), beyond ordinary norms.

If, along with religious nihilists, those who derive purpose from an extraneous source can also be atheists, then we are obliged to ask whether it is really a belief in Heaven or History that defines the nihilist, or something more fundamental. Gandhi was a religious person and believed in a higher purpose. Was he therefore a nihilist? Or was his philosophy the very antithesis of nihilism? In my view, the central issue with nihilism does not arise from the purported source of justification, but from the nature of the questions posed to, and the answers derived from metaphysical thought. The three aspects to this, each posit and reproduce the others:

- The liberation from all justifications, ie., anomie. Or the easy flitting from one justification to another by those who place themselves beyond good and evil. In brief, the question is *what activities* appear as justified to the doer, rather than the *fact* of their needing a justification.
- The evacuation of meaning, the decline of conversation and the divorce between reason and goodness. Dogma (secular or theological), does not permit dialogic modes of truth-searching. Dogmatists may arrive at political adjustment but these never result in anything beyond a pragmatic and unstable equilibrium. Genuine conversation does not take place and is replaced with cynical attitudes that hold all truths to be interpretations. Totalitarianism and relativism mirror each other. The position that 'real truth' can only be produced by mathematical sciences, banishes ethical

questions to the realm of 'mere' speculation. One ethical standard is as good as another, or one form of totalitarian force contests another. This is a nihilist condition.

- The trend toward annihilation. Nihilism's ever-present character is manifest in the metaphysic of glory, which in our times has been inextricably linked to nationalism, with its militarism and other virile pursuits. Capitalism may be seen as the most developed form of waging war.

Nihilism is not just a state of mind. It takes reified form as political and economic structure. Thus, technology has become a means of controlling humanity as a resource for glorious ends. Tagore defined a nation as "that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself." This is an important theoretical insight. I would re-frame it as follows: nationalism is the metaphysic of capitalist modernity and the nation-state a necessary institutional arrangement in global capitalism. It may be conceptualised as an 'enemy system'. Nationalism might be superseded by newer ideologically defined structures – but in all cases, the element of enforced affinity is never absent.

The Inquisition's Long Shadow

We often hear the connection being made between the Enlightenment and Auschwitz, reason and violence. May we not also make a connection between Christianity and the Inquisitorial tradition? This tradition had two components: the pursuit and extirpation of heresy and the physical annihilation of Jews and heretics. The Protestant reformation was no improvement. It is arguable that western modernity – and indeed modernity as such – has yet to emerge from the shadow of the Inquisition. Two of its latest products in the past century, Stalinism and Nazism, pursued both these objectives. One was slanted towards doctrinal purification, the other towards racial purification. Both were manifest in brutal systems that made a mockery of law and justice. They practiced inwardly oriented forms of colonialism and slavery that progressed towards outer forms, and they based themselves on radical alterity – the reification of otherness to the point of noetic and physical annihilation. Liberal imperialism has incorporated these elements, but because its

victims lay overseas or were 'aborigines', its own 'final solutions' were glossed over. Today it is difficult to deny the existence of totalitarian features within what is known as 'western civilisation'.

The totalitarian aspect of the Inquisition – the requirement that all doctrinal knowledge meld together physics and metaphysics, that scientific inquiry remain subservient to theological dogma, was made apparent in the fate of Galileo. In this case the enemy was novelty and scientific rationality. (It is another matter that with the liberation of science from religious fetters, the emergent technological vision was harnessed to the development of ever more extensive forms of domination over both humans and nature).

This is why the question of truth and its relationship with the Absolute, and with political domination are so crucial and, in a sense, timeless. The western tradition fetishised alterity to a deadly dimension. In modern times this alterity has passed over from (or be-straddles) the zone of theology to that of ideology. And because it has reduced truth and reason to a mathematical and amoral concept divorced from goodness, it has proved incapable of dealing with alterity other than via popular stupidity and cultivated obscurantism (nullifying science's commitment to empirical facticity); and the development of technologies of annihilation. Today this technology undermines nature's ecological balance and has become a threat to all forms of life. We are confronted with the semantic vaporisation of language and cannibalistic modes of governance.

An Antidote to Nihilism

What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?

Gandhi's approach to politics confronts both these features: dogma and its mirror-opposite, semantic anomie on the one hand and annihilationism on the other. Totalitarian ideology and democratic dialogue are mutually exclusive discourses. The first can afford to oscillate between dogma and relativism – when affinity is enforced and worldviews are upheld at the point of a knife, one truth is as good as another. Or as good as the amount of force it brings to the field. Democracy on the other hand, can be built only upon discursively arrived-at truths, and non-violence is an essential

pre-requisite for discourse.

Gandhi's language was simple and straightforward, and he could admit to being perplexed. He was not a moral relativist, and whilst being a critic of modernity, did not believe that modernity had resulted in a transvaluation of all values. To the contrary, he held that there were truths that 'transcended history' – he held fast to such truths and tried to build a democratic and law-governed political edifice upon them. The doctrine of ahimsa was a transcendent truth. He believed in rational and moderate speech, albeit delivered in conventional terms, attempting simultaneously to bring about radical social transformation and revolutionary changes in political arrangements, all the while telling his compatriots and the world, about the reasonable-ness of non-violence.

In his approach to ideas Gandhi's mental universe was aeons apart from the refurbished inquisitorial ambience of radical modern ideologies. His engagement with alterity was couched in terms of acceptance rather than obliteration. He refused to accept the normless pretensions of science – his wisdom retained the connection between truth and virtue. Thus he said, "I regard the employment of the atom bomb for the wholesale destruction of men, women and children as the most diabolical use of science"; and "There are two kinds of shastras in the world – one *satvik* and the other *rajasik*, one conforming to dharma and the other not conforming to dharma. The shastra of the atom bomb does not conform to dharma. It does not show faith in God. It usurps the place of God." Those who demur at his theological language may remind themselves of J Robert Oppenheimer's remark in 1945 that physicists had come to know sin. Physics and metaphysics are not that far apart, after all. Metaphysics is a means of formulating an intelligible access to inscrutable things.

The only solid foundations of human meaning and social life are truth and non-violence. Truth arises not as a concept but as an intuition crucial to speech, incorporating wholeness and intelligibility. It is a first principle, like goodness. Even the deconstruction of truth cannot do without that which it attempts to destabilize. (The celebration of semantic chaos is a luxury most of humanity cannot afford). Thence it progresses to the ideal and to virtue or goodness, from which, in the name of overcoming metaphysics, modern science and rationalism have tried to dissociate it. The revival of rational speech is crucial to understanding our predicament and towards efforts at transcending it. Ahimsa stems from truth, for just as

the cessation of speech is the first sign of annihilation, the perseverance of speech requires the cessation of violence. Every attempt at reviving speech (as in the late-Soviet 'glasnost') is an attempt to transcend nihilism.

Is there a universal good to endorse, and are there truths to uncover? In the past these concepts have been reified and reinforced by violence and a God's Eye View of the world. Recently they have been relativised, deconstructed and denied all semantic stability. The critique of certitude (or Absolute Truths) is sometimes framed in terms of the permanently provisional nature of knowledge. If this state of affairs continues, we shall hang in perpetuity between Divine Will or the End of History, which amounts to the same thing; and the nihilist abyss. Some of us will submit to Domination, others to Chaos. In fact, the totalitarian nature of modern ideologies combines these two elements, for partisan claims to infallibility can only deal with the flux of human affairs by substituting one dictat for another, one unchallengeable account of history for another. Such Final Truths are unstable and subservient to political convenience. The emperor has no clothes, but we are forbidden to remark upon his nakedness. Domination and Chaos can forever reproduce each other.

May we seek pure ideals and truth in the present, in non-messianic time? Provisionality is an inadequate response to ideological finality. A moderate account of human nature, as distinct from theoretical extremism, ideological absolutism and scepticism recognises that the human predicament generates its own virtues, ideals and truths. Knowledge and wisdom are never final, but nonetheless, human life has a certain regularity about it, such as the need to communicate, create a division of labour, dispose of the dead and produce accounts, howsoever disparate, of our relation to eternity. People of every culture have been gazing at the stars for millennia, hence the old connection of astrology and astrophysics. Knowledge of these predictable features of life requires some consensus as to the pursuit of wisdom. This requires, firstly, that we cease equating speech with silence; and overcome the schism between reason and goodness. Secondly, that we respect unconditionally the right of infants to a secure existence, and value the birth of each person as a manifestation of humanity's potential for new beginnings. Truth and ahimsa may be renamed as wisdom and survival.

The Mahabharata reports a sutra: *Aa-nrishansyam parmo dharma* (refraining from brutality is the supreme virtue) as an utterance of the

heroic Yudhishtir facing a test of wisdom failure in which will cost him his life and that of his brothers. If we leave aside the implications of the fascinating distinction between *ahimsa* and *ānṛśamsyam*, this imperative is directed both at those qualified to rule, and to anyone else who will listen – it functions as an ethic. It goes beyond the principle of sovereignty by refusing to make an exception of the state of exception. It is placed in the mouth of a deity presiding over water and forests, and it speaks wisdom to those caught up in a violent conflict. Because it is incapable of realisation, it is elevated to an abstract virtue. In this respect it resembles the concept of freedom in Stoic philosophy – food for thought but not for the body. But all virtues yearn for realisation, and the imperative of ahimsa speaks to our age with timeless and fresh resonance. With his combination of gentleness and strength, Gandhi challenged the bad faith of sectarian theology by placing non-violence in the political arena. This is what makes him unique. Once the centrality of ahimsa is grasped (which may never be) we may go beyond the opposition between moral and pragmatic standpoints.

Once, in the face of hostile sloganeering in Bengal in 1940, Gandhi remarked, "I love to hear the words 'Down with Gandhism'. An 'ism' deserves to be destroyed. It is a useless thing. the real thing is non-violence. It is immortal. It is enough for me if it remains alive. I am eager to see Gandhism wiped out at an earlier date... if any sect is established in my name after my death my soul would cry out in anguish."

It is remarkable that Gandhi said and did what he did, at a time when the disease of modern exterminism was at its height. Some might say it was miraculous – Einstein came close to saying so. Indian politicians occasionally fight about whether Gandhi is the father or son of the Nation. It would be truer to say that Gandhi's life became the foundation for the Indian Union. This was a sad rehearsal of the ghastly tradition of founding a new edifice upon a blood sacrifice. It would be even sadder if this man's greatness were to be forgotten in a world laid waste by the latest versions of that merciless purchase. The man who extracted the Mahabharata's greatest truth had left modernity behind him long before we began listening.

Outline of a presentation to the Fulbright-Hayes Study Group seminar 'In Search of Gandhi's India', New Delhi, July 1, 2008.

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FEBRUARY 2009, HARDNEWS MAGAZINE

The Agony of Palestine

It would appear that all humanity deserves human rights, except the Palestinians.

Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza has ended (coincidentally?) just before President Obama's inauguration. It has cost 1300 Palestinian lives, half of them children and women. Over 5500 have been wounded. Thirteen Israeli soldiers and civilians have been killed. Clinics, schools, cemeteries, and UN buildings stocked with humanitarian supplies have been decimated. John Ging, head of the UN Palestinian refugee agency in Gaza, has spoken of violations in international law. The Israeli military are accused of using powerful shells in civilian areas which they knew would cause casualties; using banned weapons such as phosphorus bombs; holding civilians as human shields; attacking medical facilities, killing 12 ambulance men, and killing policemen with no military role.

The Red Cross protested after the army moved a Palestinian family into a building and shelled it, killing 30. The surviving children clung to the bodies of their dead mothers for four days while the army blocked rescuers from reaching the wounded. One extended family has lost 48 members. Human Rights Watch has called on the UN Security Council to set up a commission of inquiry. Amnesty International says hitting residential areas with shells that send blast and shrapnel over a wide area constitutes "prima facie evidence of war crimes". Two leading Israeli human rights organisations have written to the country's attorney general demanding he investigate the allegations. Around 540 Israeli citizens have announced

that "Israel has returned to openly committing war crimes, worse than what we have seen in a long time", and called for "massive intervention by the international community", asking the world to "condemn and not become an accomplice in Israel's crimes".

Despite all this, the West continues to give carte-blanche to Israel and equates the colonised people of Palestine with a rampaging army which has always blocked all attempts to stop its expansionism. In extreme situations, the issue is treated as if it were one of two equal parties, one of whom – the Palestinians – are for no rhyme or reason, launching terrorist attacks upon the other, Israel, which we are repeatedly told, has "the right to defend itself". When it comes to the substance of sovereignty, however, Israel insists on the right to deny statehood to the Palestinians, control its borders, seize its (remaining) territories, impose blockades at will, build a security wall on Palestinian land, control its water resources, impose collective punishments such as destruction of olive groves and homes, and to refuse to recognise its own (Israel's) borders in preparation for further expansion. All that Israel seems to want of the Palestinian population displaced by it is to perform cheap labour or better still, to disappear. We do not hear the mainstream media or Western politicians ask whether the Palestinians too have a right to defend themselves, or whether they must passively accept forced dispossession, encroachment and perpetual humiliation. Maybe they should commit collective suicide!

Contending Fundamentalisms

Arab states have cynically exploited the Palestinians for decades. Most of these states have evolved as dictatorial or military systems, in some cases with overt American support. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia (with the acquiescence of the US) financed the infiltration of the resistance by fundamentalist organisations like the Taliban. It is true that Hamas has an extremist ideology that refuses to recognise Israel or to renounce violence. However, it also developed social roots against the backdrop of a corrupt Palestinian Authority. It was elected to run the Gaza administration, after initial encouragement by Israel itself, which was seeking to divide the Palestinian resistance. It is ironic that Israel, a state founded on Biblical claims and that rejects the very idea of a secular, non-denominational constitution, should object to the emergence of

religious fanaticism among the people it violently displaced. It is often said that Israel is a democracy in a sea of backwardness. A democracy is known not only for institutions such as free elections, but also in terms of whom it defines as the 'demos', or people. The South African apartheid regime also called itself a democracy. But this 'democracy' was based upon exclusionist principles. In its foundational structure, Israel has more in common with Pakistan and South Africa than with India. So, it is not surprising that the supporters of the fascist doctrine of Hindu Rashtra have been Israel's most fervent Indian admirers. The ideal of a Jewish state at war with Muslims resonates with their aspiration for a Hindu State that will settle its 'minority problem' with an iron hand. Unfortunately, these Nazi fantasies are likely to produce not a 'final solution', but a permanent state of war and hostility.

The crisis in Gaza is not a 'Muslim' concern. Sadly, this is how the mainstream Indian media insists on seeing it. The Palestine issue is an outcome of colonial occupation and settlement. Its origins are complex, yet Gandhi and India's national leadership were clear that the Zionist project was misconceived and essentially colonial. Gandhi's set forth his views on the matter in his *Harijan* editorial on November 11, 1938, in the context of pressure on him from Zionist quarters. He began by saying that his sympathies were with the Jews, who had been subjected to inhuman treatment and persecution for a long time. "But", Gandhi asserted, "my sympathy does not blind me to the requirements of justice. The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me. The sanction for it is sought in the Bible and in the tenacity with which the Jews have hankered after their return to Palestine. Why should they not, like other peoples of the earth, make that country their home where they are born and where they earn their livelihood?".

Christianity, Nazism and Anti-Semitism

The origins of the never-ending crisis in West Asia lie in the long history of Christian anti-Semitism. For centuries, the Catholic Church and its offshoots called for the punishment of Jews for their mythical role in the murder of Jesus Christ. The myth originated in Biblical gospels, and was perpetuated by Christianity's greatest intellects, including Saint Paul, Saint Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Calvin, not to mention the Papacy.

The story was that the Jews took upon themselves and all their children the onus of this crime. For centuries Jews were condemned as the devil's sensual offspring, money-worshipers who deserved to be enslaved, their property confiscated, their synagogues burnt, their homes destroyed. They were to live separately, forbidden from owning land, from marrying Christians. They were held responsible for the Black Death in the 14th century, they were the special targets of the Spanish Inquisition.

After the Russian Revolution, a section of the Church began to see a link between Judaism and Communism – Hitler's favorite theme. In 1933, Hitler reportedly assured Church functionaries that he would "take no steps against the Jews that the Church has not taken in 1500 years". This noxious tradition attained its apogee in the Nazi genocide of six million European Jews between 1941 and 1945, known as the Holocaust, or Shoah. It was only a matter of degree, of elevating murder into an industry, that marked the difference between Nazism and Christian anti-Semitism. The thundering silence of Pope Pius XII in the 1940s, despite the appeals of Catholics, Allied governments and Jewish organisations was a logical outcome of this theologically ordained 'enemy system'. The man who acquired the informal title Hitler's Pope, is currently in process of being conferred sainthood by the Vatican.

Notably, the Nazi murder of between 700,000 to 1.5 million Romanis, or gypsies, is barely mentioned in our media discourses regarding the Holocaust. Of Hindu origin, the Romani's have been a nomadic population within Europe for centuries. They were typically regarded as dirty, mentally deficient, and sub-human, and they continue to be persecuted in Europe, most recently by the Italian government. Himmler ordered their extermination in December 1942. Despite the fact that they lost such a great proportion of their numbers to Nazi exterminism, no reparation has been made to the gypsy population by the German government. Nor do we hear Western or Indian politicians express anguish at their plight. Meanwhile, the burden of Christianity's sins against the Jews has been transferred to the shoulders of Palestinians. And Europe's remaining Jews have been shoved yet again into yet another ghetto, albeit a privileged one named Israel, to displace their collective trauma upon a people who were never anti-Semitic in the first place.

The Colonisation of Palestine

Originally part of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine was entrusted to the British government under a League of Nations mandate. In November 1917, the British announced the Balfour Declaration favouring the Zionist ideal of a Palestinian home for the Jewish people but promised to protect the political rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. After World War II, the Zionist movement launched a concerted campaign to establish Israel. Groups such as the Irgun and the Stern gang launched actions described as terrorist even by Israelis. Along with the underground Israeli Army they committed atrocities such as the Deir Yassin massacre of more than 100 villagers to enforce the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. They even assassinated the UN envoy, Count Bernadotte.

The UN Plan for the Partition of Palestine in 1948 (supported by the USSR but opposed by India and many Third World countries) awarded 55 per cent of Palestine to Israel and 45 per cent to Palestine's original inhabitants. Israel captured more land in the 1948 war. Thousands of Palestinian families were forced to migrate to the West Bank (Jordan) and Gaza (Egypt). In the 1967 war, Israel captured up to 78 per cent of Palestine, seized East Jerusalem and unilaterally declared a unified Jerusalem to be its capital. The Security Council's Resolution 478 condemned this violation of international law, but the United States Congress declared its intention to recognize the annexation. Resolution 242 mandated Israel to return to its earlier borders, but to no effect. (The US and UK invaded Iraq in 2003 on the ground that it had flouted UN resolutions). Now the Palestinians have even less than the 22 per cent of historic Palestine the UN mandated for them in 1967. Further Israeli expansion has taken place via the Separation Wall built on Palestinian land, a structure deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice. Palestine now consists of enclaves surrounded by illegal Israeli settlements, military outposts, and checkpoints.

The simple fact that is always suppressed is this: Palestine is a land under occupation. Of the total Palestinian population of 10.5 million, only 1.3 million live in Israel as citizens. Nearly 4.5 million Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza have lived under occupation since 1948 – at first under Egypt and Jordan; since 1967 under Israeli rule. The partition of Palestine and the enforced exodus of 750,000 Arabs from their ancestral lands is

known to Palestinians as Al Nakba, 'the catastrophe'. It was and remains a gross injustice.

The US-Israeli strategic alliance is not a secret. Military co-operation has progressed to mutual preparation for urban warfare. Recently, the US Army helped construct an 'Arab' town, known as Baladia in the Negev desert in terrain similar to Gaza. This place functions as Israel's National Urban Training Centre. The mock town includes mosques, markets, denselypacked housing, narrow alley ways and a fake refugee camp. These facilities are used to train infantry in the type of combat expected in Gaza and Lebanon. It was opened in mid2007. Many of the Israeli troops currently in Gaza will have spent time there.

Gandhian Resistance

The Indian media these days is intoxicated with Israel's "war against terror". They should remember what the Mahatma had to say on the subject of Zionism despite his close friendship with Jewish intellectuals and Zionists. In 1946, Gandhi had no doubt that "the Jews have been cruelly wronged by the world;" but he re-iterated the position he had taken in 1938. He was categorical that "they [the Jews] have erred grievously in seeking to impose themselves on Palestine with the aid of America and Britain and now with the aid of naked terrorism. Why should they depend on American money or British arms for forcing themselves on an unwelcome land? Why should they resort to terrorism to make good their forcible landing in Palestine?" Few months before his assassination, Gandhi noted that the problem had become almost insoluble. Yet he advised Zionists to abstain from terrorism, to befriend the Arabs, and "not depend on British aid or American aid, save what descends from Jehovah."

The attitude of American politicians and (in great part) its media towards the ongoing bloodshed demonstrates the blatant prejudice with which they look upon the lives of Palestinian people. The double-standards are brutal. At the height of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in September 1982, a proIsraeli militia massacred between 2000 to 3000 Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps with the knowledge of the Israeli Army. Defence Minister Ariel Sharon was found responsible for this in an official Israeli inquiry and had to resign. Had Europeans been the victims of such an atrocity at the hands of an Arab general, would the West have

permitted the man responsible to occupy the position of Prime Minister? Not for nothing did Mahatma Gandhi say that western civilisation 'would be a good idea'.

America's first black president has taken office. None of us can grudge America its moment of celebration. But let us spare a thought for those whose lives have been destroyed yet again, with American complicity. The Gaza operation was George Bush's parting gift to a dispossessed people. It would appear that all humanity deserves human rights, except the Palestinians. The pain and humiliation wreaked by Israel once more upon a refugee population will create another bitter generation. All fundamentalists, Christian or Jewish, Muslim or Hindu, must understand that there are no "final solutions". No one, neither Jews nor Muslims, nor any community whatsoever should be forced to live in ghettos any longer, not in this day and age. Perhaps it is time for the Palestinians to pay heed to Gandhi's ahimsa – the only possible riposte to the violence of the Zionist project. Evil does not exist by itself, he had said, it feeds upon the good. It will collapse of its own accord when the support given to it by good is withdrawn. And the Israelis might learn from Gandhi this singular truth: "What is obtained by fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts". Maybe one day the world will pay attention to that frail man who sought so hard to counter hatred with love.

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APRIL 4, 2009, MINT NEWSPAPER

Just Another Election?

A democracy is characterised not only by free elections, but also in terms of whom it defines as the 'demos', or people

Early in 1977 I attended a mammoth meeting at Ram Lila Maidan celebrating the end of the Emergency. Jagjivan Ram had joined the opposition. Jaiprakash Narayan, Acharya Kripalani and the Imam of Jama Masjid were present. Amidst lusty cheers, Jagjivan Ram hailed Indian democracy, wherein a princess was equal to a sweeper woman. Sick of authoritarianism, the public voted the Indira regime out of power. Three years later, I spoke to a tea-vendor in Patna, eking out a living on the roadside. I asked whom he was voting for. He replied, '*hum to Indiraji ko vote denge*'. When I reminded him about the Emergency, he said that Morarji Desai and the Janata Party had been given power for five years but disintegrated in three. '*Chor-chaar ke bhag gaye*' ('they left everything and ran away') was his colourful description. What was the point of asking such people to govern again? This humble citizen had a modest expectation of his government – that it fulfils its mandate for the appointed term.

In December 1984, I joined Swami Agnivesh's campaign in Bhopal, where he stood beside victims of the gas disaster. After the communal carnage of November, it was exhilarating to see burqa-clad women from organisations representing the victims, along with Malayali members of a karamchari union, campaign for a swami in ochre robes. The same election elicited a boycott call in Bihar by Maoists. "Bullets, not ballots"

was the phrase used. The response was unique. The oppressed groups that were the support-base of the insurgency insisted upon their right to vote, if necessary, by violent means. Landowning castes were served notice that they could no longer highjack democracy by stuffing ballot boxes. Thereafter, a moderate stream of Naxalism sought popularity by protecting the peoples' right to vote. The self-styled leaders of the oppressed were taught a lesson by their followers.

Indians have become accustomed to the electoral process. For all its defects, the prolonged mass movement for Independence nurtured a democratic political culture. Efforts to curtail it will meet with resistance. Despite her autocratic tendencies, Indira Gandhi had the sense to withdraw the Emergency. That is why right and left-wing projects of radical political change seeking to overthrow the Constitution have not succeeded, and their proponents obliged to adjust their utopias to the Indian preference for democracy. But a question remains: have the mainstream parties strengthened Indian democracy?

Elections bestow authority upon officialdom and governments. The bureaucracy, judiciary and police derive their powers from the Constitution. This document gives us a means of evaluating the health of the polity. Article 21 states that none may be deprived of life or liberty except by lawful procedure. Article 49 protects monuments from spoliation and destruction. Articles 23 and 24 prohibit human trafficking, forced labour; and the employment of children under 14. Article 48-A enjoins the State to protect the environment, forests and wildlife. Article 51-A informs citizens of their duties, which include promoting harmony transcending religious, linguistic and sectional diversities; upholding women's dignity; safeguarding public property and abjuring violence; protecting forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and developing the spirit of inquiry and reform. The Directive Principles list fundamental goals that the State is duty-bound to apply. These include a just social order, the management of material resources for serving the common good, an economic system that prevents the concentration of wealth, and justice that is not curtailed by economic or other disabilities.

An appraisal of our history speaks volumes about how far the aspirants to power have upheld constitutional norms. On a minimalist standard, the important contestants have not even respected the citizens' right to life and liberty, and the rights of small children. India's leading political parties

have unleashed captive mobs upon our fellow citizens, most notably in 1984 and 2002. The activities of militia such as the Ranvir Sena and Salwa Judum are condoned by the State. Certain states are under permanent emergency, with security forces enjoying impunity for decades. Hindutva groups relentlessly pursue hatred – the attacks on Christians in Orissa and women in Bangalore are their latest gifts to the nation. In November 2007, the West Bengal government enabled partisan violence in Nandigram. Taslima Nasreen was hounded out of Kolkata after riots by Muslim fanatics.

Disrespect for law by mainstream politicians is the most dangerous aspect of our polity. Along with state officials, they would benefit from a close study of the Constitution. The disintegration of every polity in India's neighbourhood should serve as a warning to the Indian establishment, which has often crossed all limits of lawful conduct and encouraged behaviour detrimental to the legitimacy of the Indian Union. The citizens' expectations are straightforward – transparent government, neutral policing and a fair judicial system. These requirements are institutional, not material. People do not want government to give them jobs or food, so much as an environment in which they may work and feed themselves. These requirements are provided for in our Constitution. But it is precisely these simple needs that have been ignored by the political leadership.

The electoral process is a manifestation of these issues. Thus, to demand high office on the ground of one's identity or sectional animosity is to appeal to the most primitive instincts. Such claims have become blatant in recent times. Past elections have seen the manipulation of electoral lists to deprive people of voting rights, booth capturing, intimidation and the use of liquor as an inducement. The election-rigging that took place in Jammu & Kashmir in the decades leading up to the insurgency undermined the peoples' faith in the Indian Union more than any other factor. Despite all this, on crucial occasions citizens have used elections to enforce accountability upon arrogant leaders. This happened in 1967 when non-Congress governments were elected in several states, and after the Emergency. It also happened after the NDA's Shining India campaign in 2004. Past elections have shown that efforts to manipulate the vote do not always succeed. Given sufficient motivation, the citizenry has thrown out unpopular governments.

After 1945, global security was contaminated by the Cold War. The non-communist bloc was dominated by the Western alliance, whose

commitment to democracy was contingent upon convenience: it consistently used authoritarianism and ethnic divisiveness for imperial advantage. Hence, the American support to undemocratic regimes in South Korea, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Of the newly independent states, Indonesia succumbed to authoritarianism and then a US-backed military dictatorship. Its first democratic presidential election took place in 2004. China inscribed single-party rule into its constitution – its rulers remain fearful of democratic freedoms. Sri Lanka's elite engaged in a competitive sectarianism that targeted Tamils and resulted in civil war. Two states were founded upon religiously defined nationalism: Pakistan and Israel. These unstable entities have become the vortex of global conflict. Today, the world watches while Israel explodes and Pakistan implodes. A democracy is characterised not only by free elections, but also in terms of whom it defines as the 'demos', or people. The application of exclusionist principles in the very foundations of a state is a recipe for disintegration.

The stamina of Indian democracy derives from its inclusive and secular principles. The burning issues of our times are global, not national in their scope. Nation-states matter only in the manner of the examples they present of political norms that stand the test of time.

The preservation of India's democratic freedoms, tolerant values and its rule of law matter a great deal to the world, provided these are upheld without arrogance. South Asia has become the arena of far-reaching geopolitical changes. Western policy towards the region continues to be driven by pragmatism rather than principle. Facing the oncoming challenges will be easier if the Indian Union remains true to its foundational ideals. The coming elections carry greater significance than our leaders appear to realise.

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WINTER 2009 – SPRING 2010, IIC QUARTERLY

Glory Days

How the ideal called People's China lost its sheen

Many years ago, when some of us argued about the ills of the present and, more to the point, the ills of contemporary India, we would be asked by our elders where such ideals had ever been implemented. 'In China!' – we'd reply without hesitation. Peoples' China was our El Dorado, the land of promise. Under the leadership of the Great Helmsman, Chairman Mao, the Chinese Communist Party was looking after the true interests of Chinese peasants and workers and marching towards the socialist future. Nay, as we were communists and hence internationalists, the Great, Glorious and Correct Chinese Communist Party – GGC-CCP for short – represented the oppressed people of the entire world! China was the future transported into the present. Our elders and betters would point out the totalitarian nature of the regime, the total lack of freedom of speech and political democracy. What freedom, we'd ask. Freedom for whom? India needed to be like China, and we were going to take it in that direction.

More than four decades have passed since then. And – as I learnt in the course of a recent conversation with a friend in the corporate world – today, it is the corporate honchos who regard China with great admiration. This is fairly well-known, for haven't many of us heard the utterance 'Mumbai will be India's Shanghai'? Yet it felt different upon personal audition. 'Oh, if only India could be like China!' my friend said enviously. Technology was going to solve all the world's problems, and China was leading the way.

Social and political issues were a complete red herring. No troublesome trade unions, no stalling on infrastructural development in the name of displacement. No bloody human rights *walas* objecting to piffling hiccups such as forced re-settlement, land acquisition and special economic zones. A state committed to untrammelled progress. Into that heaven of bliss, he seemed to say, let my country awake!

Amazing as it is to contemplate the People's Republic of China's (PRC) transition from the armed camp of the world proletariat to a capitalist utopia. It is still more wondrous to sit back and reflect on how exactly the Chinese Communist Party manages to remain in the same place (absolute power in China) even through the complications of transferring its magnetic appeal from starry-eyed extremist youth, to equally starry-eyed multi-billionaires.

The original charisma of the PRC was iconoclastic. Maoism burst upon the imagination of radical youth as a rebellion launched against the decrepit 'orthodox Marxism' of the Soviet Union. It appeared as the language of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution – GPCR, in short. In its self-understanding, this was the name for Mao's final attempt to prevent the Chinese Communist Party from abandoning socialism for capitalism. In 1966, the Great Helmsman issued his famous call to Chinese students and youth: *Bombard the Headquarters*, as he exhorted them to assist him in cleansing the Party of bureaucratic and revisionist tendencies. The GPCR had a ripple effect felt far outside China, for it coincided with a global wave of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements, as well as unrest in the socialist camp. Let us not forget that 1968 witnessed the May uprising in France, and the Prague Spring followed by the Soviet invasion (more on this later), the bloody Mexico Olympics, the Tet offensive by the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. All these events served to inspire a new generation of young people the world over, who were politicised via a critique of the dominant Russian-style communism.

We came to revolutionary ideas via a re-assessment of Marxism, and China played a major role in this. I remember the hubbub caused on the Delhi University campus when Joan Robinson visited the Delhi School of Economics wearing a Mao cap. She was on her way back from a trip to China, and full of enthusiastic admiration for the GPCR. I didn't get to see her, but my close friend (the late) Arvind Das did and told us all about it. Joan was actually brandishing a copy of the highly prized Little Red

Book of Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse Tung, he said. And whenever someone threw her a critical question about China, she would read out an appropriate quotation. For example, when someone asked her: 'Don't you think Marxism is dogmatic?', her answer was: 'Chairman Mao says dogma is worse than cow dung!' And so on.

I first read about the GPCR in Robinson's slim book on the subject, *The Cultural Revolution in China*. It was brought out by Penguin books (those days there was no Indian edition), as were several seminal texts considered *de rigueur* for budding radicals. I wonder now what the Revolution would have done without Penguin Books. Our indoctrination, for one, would have been a non-starter. The Communist Manifesto was among such Penguin titles, although that was being sold for maybe eight annas in PPH (People's Publishing House) in Connaught Place, along with other necessary readings. However, Penguin gave us Che Guevara, books on Vietnam, African and Latin American liberation struggles. It also provided cult titles, such Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*; Regis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?,* to mention just a few. Penguin's contribution to world revolution apart, there were other things we read that formed our first, fresh view of the world's Red Base. These included Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*, and Felix Green's *The Wall Has Two Sides*. Not to mention Israel Epstein's *From Opium War to Liberation*.

As an ideology of newly radicalised youth, Maoism was at its very outset a mix of iconoclastic rebellion and beneficent tyranny. The iconoclasm was more apparent than the tyranny, but with hindsight, the latter was blatant, even if we did not recognise it then as such. The call to murder exploiters, to send recalcitrant leaders and sceptical intellectuals to camps where they could break stones to help them focus their minds, was not exactly a democratic aspiration! Yet this was not how we saw it then. Revolution was, after all, an act simultaneously liberating and repressive: liberating for the poor, repressive for the exploiters. That was why Marxism had described the first phase of socialism as a dictatorship of the proletariat.

So, this was how we saw China in our youth. The fascination lasted for years, and had many repercussions, aside from prompting some to take up the Naxalite cause. For others, it provided the spark of motivation for a closer study of China. They paid attention to papers on the Far East if they were history students, or to communism and socialism if they studied

political science. They tried to see things from the Chinese point of view, as outlined by Felix Greene, and by Neville Maxwell in *India's China War.* Some took up the study of the Chinese language. Many sympathised with the Chinese position in its border dispute with the USSR.

Even those not inclined to revolutionary politics and the urge to bring about a Chinese-style revolution in India, admired China for its forthright opposition to American imperialism, and its support for liberation movements and popular causes the world over. It is a pity things have turned out as they have, because there was a lot of goodwill for the PRC in India, goodwill that was undermined by the intemperate ultra-left politics of Chairman Mao's twilight years, and China's disastrous support for Yahya Khan's brutal suppression of the Awami League in East Pakistan in 1970-71. It is not an exaggeration to say that China's alliance with Pakistan and the USA, not to mention its paranoia about granting a greater degree of autonomy to Tibet, has been at the cost of its friendship potential with India.

Until the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, this faith in the radical purity of the CCP remained intact. From then on, there was something that made one less sure about its intentions. The Warsaw Pact invaded Prague to crush the Prague Spring, a term denoting the democratic atmosphere in that socialist republic inculcated by the reformist communist, Alexander Dubcek. This lasted only a few weeks before Soviet tanks went in, arrested all the reformists, and secured Czechoslovakia against the deadly virus of democracy. The experiment named 'socialism with a human face' was dead. In India, the CPI was in crisis for some 48 hours before coming out in support of the Soviet line. The CPM hailed the invasion immediately. Maoist students were relieved to find that China opposed it. But did the CCP oppose it on grounds of 'violated sovereignty', or of a defence of democracy? It was apparent that their opposition stemmed more from hatred and fear of the Soviets than any other reason. The animus became clearer the following year, with Sino-Soviet clashes over their shared northern border, along the Ussuri River. From then on, the language of doctrinal dispute became vitriolic. It was Soviet 'social-imperialism' that became China's main enemy, leading finally to its opening up to the USA in 1971 and Nixon's visit to Peking in 1972.

The Naxalite insurgency began in April 1967, with the declaration of a 'people's war' against the Indian state by the extreme faction of Indian

communism. The Chinese leadership welcomed the armed clashes between tea-garden labourers and tribal peasants in Naxalbari (north Bengal) with a *Peoples' Daily* editorial titled 'Spring Thunder Over India'. Relations between China and India took a plunge, with the CCP openly advocating the violent overthrow of the Indian state. Why didn't it also call for the revolutionary overthrow of the Burmese, Pakistani, and Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) states, or the Nepali monarchy? Truth to tell, some busybodies did ask such uncomfortable questions, but questioning was never encouraged amongst truly fervent Marxists. We soon quelled our natural curiosity. China and the Chairman knew best.

This deterioration went along with a parallel decline in relations between China and the other major communist party in India, the CPI(M). China and the USSR were at daggers drawn, and several leftists feared this would affect the support for Vietnam's struggle against the Americans. That did not happen, but when Ho Chi Minh died in 1969, his testament called for the Lao Dong (Vietnamese Workers Party) to strive to overcome the rift. A tall order indeed! In 1979, just four years after Vietnam was re-unified and the Americans driven out, China actually invaded Vietnam. Deng Hsiao Ping wanted to 'teach them a lesson' (his words) for sending in the military to overthrow the Cambodian mass murderer Pol Pot and his party, the Khmer Rouge, or Cambodian Communists. The Americans also had a soft spot for Pol Pot. Since they were still smarting from their ignominious defeat in 1975, they acquiesced in this punitive exercise and some rumours suggested that Pentagon satellites actually assisted the operations. Ultimately, Deng's divisions were repulsed by Vietnamese border guards.

The greatest blow to China's prestige arose out of its stance on the momentous developments in South Asia. From 1971 on, the Manichean formulations of Indian Maoism began shattering on the hard rocks of political reality. Chairman Mao shook hands with the war-criminal Kissinger as Vietnam continued to be bombed. A left-wing insurrection in Sri Lanka was smashed by the Bandaranaike government that enjoyed the support of India as well as Pakistan, the US, China and the USSR. Pakistan's Army refused to honour the results of the November 1970 general election that had given the Awami League an absolute majority, and launched a brutal military crackdown in East Pakistan, with the full logistic and political backing of the Chinese government. Millions of

poverty-stricken refugees flowed into West Bengal.

These happenings threw India's Maoists into confusion. To begin with, loyalty to the Chinese version of events prompted many comrades to blame India and the USSR for the crisis in Pakistan. Some, however, soon became distressed by the cynicism of the CCP. For me personally, the crucial question was the matter of freedom of speech and information. Did not Chinese workers have the right to know what was being done with the guns and ammunition that their government was exporting to Pakistan? It was shocking to learn that the Chinese press had not even informed the public of what the Pakistani army was up to. Evidently, the dictatorship of the proletariat did not trust the proletariat with the truth. We were forcefully reminded of the role of the media in authoritarian hands. There was a famous Russian joke about *Pravda* and *Izvestiya,* the two main Soviet newspapers: 'There's no *pravda* in *izvestiya*, and no *izvestiya* in *pravda*'. (*Pravda* means truth, and *izvestiya* means news in Russian). This was one domain in which the Chinese and Soviet comrades were in complete agreement. Those who imagine that the 'degeneration' of Chinese communism happened only after the death of Chairman Mao could enlighten themselves by reading Chou En Lai's letter to Yahya Khan in April 1971, after he had begun the slaughter of innocents in East Pakistan. From this time on, it became difficult to deny the ruthless pragmatism of the Chinese Communist Party. It was clear then, that they were motivated by great-power ambition rather than world revolution. Today, there is little left to argue about.

The ultra-leftists in the CCP were defeated after Mao's death in 1976, but the thread of continuity sustained between them and their successors derived from their nationalism, bordering on xenophobia. Until then, they had convinced many communists that internationalism was synonymous with Chinese nationalism. Some months ago, at a Sino-Indian conference in New Delhi's India International Centre, I had the good fortune to meet some Chinese academics of my generation, as well as some young enough to be my children. To the elders – one of whom had done hard labour during the Cultural Revolution – I said, 'Comrade! You did it because you were sent. You had no option – we went out and did hard labour, plus some other things, because we loved Chairman Mao!' He looked at me as if I were daft. So did the younger Chinese I met there. They couldn't believe they were hearing right.

As I relate these things, I experience a great sense of loss. The Chinese delegates I met at that conference were so very friendly, even affectionate. Why has it taken over four decades for me to meet and talk to ordinary Chinese people? Why has it not been possible for us to converse normally until very recently? China had such an immense impact upon the lives of so many Indians. Why were we denied the chance to speak to one another about this?

How we loved China and Chairman Mao! Mao was the route to humanity, to die for him was to die for the human race. It was immensely sad to see the death of that faith. Maybe such is the fate of all passionate attachments. Perhaps this could improve if we pruned our expectations. We need to speak again, not just about computer software, turnkey projects and expanding trade, but also about history and philosophy, books and paintings and what we want of life. We need to break the wall of silence and good manners and get back to being ordinary people.

We and the Chinese.

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Permanent Spring

A meditation on ideology, violence, and utopia

> *"All wars are the same war because war is always going on"*
> – James Hillman

On April 30, 1908, two young men, Prafulla Chaki and Khudiram Bose, entered the boundary of the Muzzafarpur Club in Bihar and waited for the hated judge Douglas Kingsford to appear. They were members of Jugantar, the foremost nationalist-revolutionary group to emerge during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal. At nightfall a horse-drawn carriage emerged, which they were sure was carrying Kingsford. A bomb was hurled into it, blowing away the rear, and severely wounding the wife and daughter of Pringle-Kennedy, a lawyer friend of the judge. He also happened to be sympathetic to Indian nationalism. Kingsford was travelling separately. Severely wounded, the daughter was dragged behind the carriage and died within the hour. Her mother died two days later. Soon afterwards, Chaki committed suicide. Khudiram was caught, and after a swift trial, hanged that August. The nationalist hagiography of these pioneering revolutionaries mentions the failure of their mission, but glosses over it to focus on their glorious sacrifice.

In 1912, a bomb thrown at Lord Minto in Delhi killed not the Viceroy, but an Indian attendant. On October 9, 1915, Deputy Superintendent of Police Jatindra Mohan Ghosh was sitting in his house in Mymensingh along

with his family. Some youths came to the door and fired at him, killing him on the spot. His three-year-old son, whom he was holding, was also killed. In 1932, in an attack on the Pahartali European Railway Club in Chittagong, thirteen card-playing civilians were injured, and an Anglo-Indian woman killed. The action was led by a schoolteacher, Pritilata Waddadar, who committed suicide.[1] Waddadar was an associate of the legendary Surya Sen. She was hailed as an exemplary patriot, which indeed she was. So were Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki. And so was Charu Mazumdar, the founder of what is known as Naxalism.

A century later, we are in the same place. In June 2005, over 40 bus passengers died in a mine explosion in Nepal's Chitwan district. The Nepali Maoists' apology for this carnage must be set against the fact that the blast was wire-triggered – detonated by someone who could see the passenger-laden vehicle. On August 15, 2004, the CPI-Maoist shot nine persons in Andhra Pradesh, including a legislator, his son, driver and an employee. On September 12, 2005, its cadre slit the throats of seventeen villagers in Giridih. In March 2006, thirteen tribals were killed and four injured in a mine blast. The Maoists apologised, stating that it was due to a failure in their intelligence.

On February 25, 2006, twenty-five tribals were killed and forty injured in a mine triggered by the CPI (Maoist) in Errabore, Dantewada. In July 2006, the CPI (Maoist) attacked a relief camp in the same place, killing thirty tribals, including children. A party spokesperson referred to the children's deaths as an 'unnecessary loss'. But he continued: 'No people's war can be so clinical as to have no civilian casualty...no class war can be conducted with clinical precision. It is very tortuous and painful, just as the daily life of the bulk of our population is no less agonising.'[2] It is a moot point as to whether the rest of the victims were class enemies who deserved nothing less than death.

Our other radicals are no less ruthless. In August 2000, nearly a hundred people were killed in eight massacres in Kashmir. They included Amarnath pilgrims and some members of a Kashmiri Muslim family. Most of them were brickkiln workers from Central India and Bihar. On August

1 Amiya K. Samanta, *Terrorism in Bengal: A Collection of Documents*, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1995, Vol. 6, p. 450; 928.

2 'Maoists in India: A Rejoinder', *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 14, 2006, by CPI (Maoist) spokesperson Azad.

13, 2004, nine school children were killed by a blast triggered by ULFA in Upper Assam.

Such cases may be multiplied ad-infinitum. Yet accounts of them by the proponents of holy war barely mention, or hurry past the significance of the death that was not intended. Or the deaths of persons whose crime was that they belonged to the wrong community. Questions of innocence are brushed away by invoking some version of theodicy – God's plan to extract good from evil. In secular doctrines God is replaced by History; hence Camus' name for killing in the name of the future: *historical murder.*

Some radicals attribute guilt to everyone even remotely associated with the system. In the western tradition, ethical utilitarianism goes back to Aquinas' theodicean doctrine of double effect. India's patriotic assassins drew sustenance from the *Gita*. Theories of just war, sacred violence, collateral damage (by whatever name), and a bright future seen as providing justification for cruelty in the present, are not peculiar to Naxalism. Common to all such doctrines is a dismissal of the plight of those who had done no wrong.

The Maniktola Conspiracy case – concerning the Muzzafarpur killings – culminated in 1909. Its two death sentences were later commuted to deportation. Aurobindo Ghosh was acquitted, much to the delight of nationalist opinion. His lawyer, the brilliant CR Das, concluded his defence with the words that his client stood not only before the court, but 'before the bar in the High Court of History.' Here is the first Indian example of political murder represented as something fit for judgement, not by the living but by the yetunborn. Inspired by Russian nihilists, this became the characteristic narrative of the modern revolutionary, to be repeated across continents. Surely today, after a century witness to millions of unnatural deaths, we need to think again about the stamina of the phenomenon of sacred violence.

The insurrectionary trend in Indian communism dates back to 1948, when the so-named Ranadive line sent the CPI cadre into armed confrontation with the newly independent Indian Union, on the ground that this independence was fake. After two years, this escapade was withdrawn on stern advice from the Soviet communists. Meanwhile a schism developed in international communism, fuelled by Sino-Soviet disputes on strategy. Friendliness between India and China dissipated with border clashes in the late 1950s and Chinese military action in Tibet in

1959. After thousands of Tibetans took refuge in India, the Chinese media began attacking Nehru as a 'running dog' of the imperialists. The Sino-Indian war was contemporaneous with the Soviet-American confrontation over Cuban missiles (September-October 1962); and lasted until the end of that crisis. The Indian communists split between those who criticised the Chinese for aggression and those who were neutral or upheld international communist solidarity. In 1964, the latter founded the CPI(M).

Naxalism and the 'murder manual'

The CPI remained loyal to the USSR; the CPI(M) assumed a neutral stance. But the radicals in the latter demanded revolutionary action. The United Front ministry of 1967 included the two communist parties and the Bangla Congress. Soon after its formation, workers launched militant industrial actions. Expectations among the rural poor, coupled with the aggressiveness of landed elites anticipating official hostility, led to heightened tensions. Labourers and sharecroppers in Darjeeling were organised in a union led by Charu Mazumdar, secretary of the CPI(M) district committee, and his collaborator Kanu Sanyal. Charu was a strong advocate of Mao's theory of people's war that called for the creation of an army of revolutionary peasants via a strategy of guerrilla warfare, leading to the overthrow of the state machinery of the exploiting classes.

In April 1967, the Siliguri sub-division in Darjeeling was witness to seizures of land and foodgrain along with attacks on the landed rich. Land Revenue Minister Harekrishna Konar tried to placate his ultra-left comrades, but his efforts were futile. On May 24, a police platoon was attacked by several hundred peasants in the precinct of Naxalbari police station. Inspector Sonam Wangdi was hit by two arrows and died that night. On May 25, the police fired at hostile crowds near Khoribari police station. Ten people, mostly women and children were killed. The Naxalite movement had begun and was hailed by China as 'Spring Thunder Over India.' The CPI(M-L) was inaugurated in 1969.

Charu's doctrine was focused on killing 'class enemies' as a step towards the establishment of a people's army. The cadre named it the 'annihilation line'. What stands out is the freedom accorded to the 'petty-bourgeois intellectual comrades' to instigate the murder of anyone they deemed a class enemy. The criteria were always wide-ranging enough

to include peasants and workers if they were seen as informers. Little, if any thought was given to the legitimacy of such extreme punishment, or the absence of any transparent process of determining guilt. Or rather, legitimacy was seen as self-evident, as in a crime of passion. As for the leaders, it derived from the assumed superiority of the party's version of Marxism-Leninism.

In an article that became known as the murder manual, Charu spelled out what he had in mind:"The method of forming a guerrilla unit has to be wholly conspiratorial. No inkling... should be given out even in the meetings of the political units of the Party. This conspiracy should be between individuals on a person-to-person basis. The petty-bourgeois intellectual comrade must take the initiative in this respect... He should approach the poor peasant who, in his opinion, has the most revolutionary potentiality, and whisper in his ears: 'Don't you think it is a good thing to finish off such and such a jotedar?' ...We should not use any kind of firearms at this stage.

"The guerrilla unit must rely wholly on choppers, spears, javelins and sickles... The guerrillas should come from different directions pretending... to be innocent persons and gather at a previously appointed place, wait for the enemy, and, when the opportune moment comes, spring at the enemy and kill him...The middle peasant cadre and the petty-bourgeois intellectual comrades should be removed (from the guerrilla unit) if possible. When guerrilla actions become more frequent we have to gradually bring in these willing fighters. In fact, a time will come when the battle-cry will be: 'He who has not dipped his hand in the blood of class enemies can hardly be called a communist'."[3]

Charu Mazumdar foresaw a revolutionary victory in the 1970s. A man whose sole contribution to socialism consisted in elevating homicidal mania to a political principle has become an icon for the ultra-left tradition. There is no sign of a change in the expendable status of human life for revolutionaries.

Thus, CPI (Maoist) general secretary Ganapathi cites an unnamed source for the arguable observation that five times as many people died of hunger and disease in the past decade than all the casualties

3 Charu Mazumdar, 'A Few Words About Guerrilla Actions', *Liberation*, February 1970. S.K. Ghosh, (ed.), *The Historic Turning Point: A Liberation Anthology*, vol. 2, Calcutta, 1993, p. 71.

in revolutionary wars over two centuries.[4] Commenting on the eclipse of socialism in Russia and China, he foresees a 'bitter struggle' against communists who 'change colour', without a reflective word on the ramifications of that eclipse. The citation of death by hunger as a justification for death by revolution is grotesque; and given the regrettable tendency of communists to become autocrats, all we may look forward to apparently, is more bloodshed. Eternal war is the God of the world system.

Middle class ideologues

Rabindra Ray offers us some basic observations and questions about Indian Maoism.[5] The first is that Naxalism is intellectually driven. Its doctrinal inputs come from middle class ideologues, who take it upon themselves to lead 'the people'.[6] The second is that it places utmost stress – as does the entire communist tradition – upon correct social knowledge as the precursor to a correct strategy; but has never clarified its stance regarding the criteria and the sources for arriving at such knowledge. The third is the possibility that it is not the 'correct analysis' that leads to the appropriate strategy, but rather, the already-desired strategy that seeks its own analysis, its own version of truth.

The Naxalite movement is not a movement of landless peasants and tribals seeking to overthrow state power. It is a project defined as such by those who are neither peasants nor workers nor tribals; but who claim to represent their interests. The right to make this claim was dependent upon what the earliest Naxalites referred to as 'revolutionary authority'. The mantle of legitimate authority was obtained via certification by the international communist movement, in this case from the Chinese Communist Party led by Chairman Mao.

This leads to an infinite regression: from where did the CCP derive legitimacy? From the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) under Stalin, who got it from Lenin, and so on. The Russian Revolution was troubled from the outset by the supervention of the autonomous Soviets

4 Ganapathi, 'Open Reply to Independent Citizen's Initiative on Dantewada', *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 6, 2007.

5 Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988.

6 'It is our love and commitment to the people that has drawn us away from our homes and families and goads us on to sacrifice our lives so that the vast majority can live in peace.' 'Open Reply', op. cit., fn. 4.

by the party, but that is a digression. Suffice it to say that the legitimacy of the communist party is based upon foreknowledge of the end of history, which gives it the task to lead workers towards a classless society.[7] Its claim to represent the true, (as opposed to illusory) interests of the working class is an epistemological one, which is complicated by the lack of an epistemological theory. Hence the tradition has dealt with complexity by means of dogma, rather than dialogue.

The most glaring consequence of its church-like approach to truth has been the multiplication of 'sole spokesmen' of the working class – and we know that sole spokesmanship straddles the range of authoritarian politics. Now, whereas we may all assert the superiority of our view of things, such an assertion becomes onerous when we disdain to ground it on anything more than prophetic revelation, and yet claim a right to declare someone an enemy of the people and order his or her death. (The link between absolute knowledge and corporal power is an ancient tradition). We are left with a metaphysics of decision: the 'ones who know' cast light upon the situation and tell us what to do.

In a recent public debate, the Maoist general secretary raised some philosophical issues. "How does one get to know the truth from a plethora of facts? Can you say with full confidence that your perception of the reality in Dantewada is not tainted by your ideological biases against the Maoist movement and violent revolution? Is it possible for anyone, even if one claims to be a neutral or impartial intellectual, to analyse facts and arrive at conclusions correctly if she/he has an inherent aversion for armed struggle? We know that our answers will not satisfy you. How is it possible when we have different ideological and political perceptions towards the means to be adopted to bring the oppressed out of their miserable conditions of existence?

"There is no level playing field in the merciless class war between the cruelly exploited and brutally oppressed majority on the one hand, and the wealthy, enriched at the expense of the hundreds of millions of poor on the other. In a class divided society there cannot be any absolute truth in the matters under discussion. The truth of the oppressed is different from the truth of the oppressor. This has been true right from the time of Spartacus and the unsung slave heroes who waged their struggles against slavery.

7 'Our armed struggle is to draw the curtain on the pre-history of humankind and herald the dawn of real history.' Ganapathi, ibid.

Either you were with the slaves, in which case Spartacus and the rebels represented a just cause and spoke the truth, or you were with the slave owners."[8]

Ganapathi tells us that getting at the truth from a plethora of facts is a problem. In a class society, any person's perception of reality will be tainted if they have an aversion to armed struggle. Disagreement with violent revolution is an ideological bias – presumably, an inclination towards violence relieves one of bias. He knows his answers will not satisfy us, because ideological and political perceptions differ. (He does not clarify the difference between *ideological* and *political*.) In a class divided society there can be no absolute truth in the matters under discussion (perhaps he means questions of political power); and *this* (that there can be no absolute truth etc.) has been true for generations. Either you are with the slaves or with their oppressors.

These arguments carry the following implications: Ganapathi possesses the truth about truth. This position is superior to both 'the truth of the oppressed' and 'the truth of the oppressor', since he is neither the one nor the other, but an ideologue who knows the basically perspectival reality about truth *per se*. It does not concern him that his answers will not sound satisfactory. His attachment to armed struggle is the product of a correct theory, to which he has privileged access. Discussion is futile, because if you're not with us, you're against us – your truth is tainted with partisanship towards the oppressors. Since all truth has a class bias, we have no independent criteria for judging the veracity of his party line, because selecting those criteria will also involve class bias. Ultimately it all boils down to faith.

So, all truth is relative and biased, except Ganapathi's version of it, which is absolute because it is armed. Not just power, but truth itself flows out of the barrel of a gun. Even if the party line is considered just as biased as the arguments of its critics, it doesn't matter, because after all, there's bias everywhere. When the very notion of truth is cast into the shadow of absolutism and class bias, we have no means of judging the objectivity of any statement whatsoever, nor hope for public debate about anything. Even the facts about exploitation, caste and gender oppression, and for that matter, the situation in Dantewada become matters of mere opinion.

8 Ibid.

We are left with a series of positions, each absolute unto itself. Ganapathi, like many other Marxist-Leninists, has announced the political abolition of truth. Totalitarianism emerges as the apotheosis of relativism.

Politics, militarism, and private armies

But a discussion of civilian warfare would be half-baked without considering other warriors. During the national movement, Indian politics acquired an ambivalent relationship to militarism. The fascination with soldiering was most visible in Subhas Bose. Revolutionary terrorists were inclined to fashion themselves after the Irish Republican Army. Communal ideologues were obsessed with religious civil war – they still are. In November 1947 the AICC passed a resolution warning that "the activities of the Muslim National Guards, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Akali Volunteers and such other organisations... represent an endeavour to bring into being private armies, (and) must be regarded as a menace to the hard-won freedom of the country."[9]

The proliferation of private armies in India over the decades proves the foresight of this warning. These formations include the Sunlight Sena, Khalistani groups, the Ranvir Sena, the Bajrang Dal, ULFA and jehadi groups in Kashmir and elsewhere. The North East is full of paramilitaries in varying degrees of proximity to legal parties. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP and the Congress jointly support a vigilante force named Salwa Judum that exists to terrorise all forms of resistance to the handover of mineral-rich lands to corporates.

Communal paramilitaries, in particular the RSS, have forged a far more sophisticated method of undermining the democratic polity envisaged in the Indian Constitution than the ultra-left. This method is based on Savarkar's directive of 1942, asking Hindu nationalist cadre to infiltrate the organs of state. Aided by widespread communal prejudice, Hindutva's cadres acquired a hold over the highest echelons of state in what Gramsci called a war of position. And they have used this to launch successive assaults upon the Constitution.[10]

During the Babri Masjid demolition campaign, a retired DGP of Uttar

9 *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 97, p. 480.

10 See Omar Khalidi, Khaki and Ethnic Violence in India: Armed Forces, Police and Paramilitary During Communal Riots, Three Essays Collective, Delhi, 2010.

Pradesh joined the VHP and called for India's Muslims to be stripped of voting rights. This campaign cost the lives of some 1.500 citizens in 1990 and 3,000 in 1992. Some years ago, a retired CBI Director extolled the Bajrang Dal's 'patriotic' activities at its annual function. Senior functionaries of RAW and the Intelligence Branch openly sympathise with the RSS upon retirement – one can imagine what they were doing in service. Police officers in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra have been promoted despite strictures against them by commissions of inquiry.

In 2003, the NDA regime tried surreptitiously to do away with Schedule 5 of the Constitution that protects tribal lands from encroachment. The Hindutva lobby has used its official clout to unleash captive mobs, indulge in hate-speech, pass objectionable laws, enable the entry of the RSS into state institutions, undermine citizens' rights and suborn the police and military. (The latter practice was noted by the Home Ministry under Sardar Patel on February 4, 1948, in the order banning the RSS after Gandhi's assassination.) Evidently, a taste for political violence is compatible with being a senior policeman or a senior official of the state.

People are entitled to hold extreme views; even when they think they are upholding the dignity of Islam and Hinduism via the burning of books and underwear. The problem arises when people in authority misuse their formal power to promote violence. It is here that every mainstream party carries a burden of guilt. It is time for the establishment to ask itself what exactly it objects to in Naxalite activity. Is it lawlessness and contempt for the Constitution? Are these things not visible in the activities of the RSS, banned thrice since 1948? Or in the deeds of the Congress, especially in 1984? Did not the CPI(M) dispatch an illegal vigilante force to Nandigram on two occasions in 2007?

Maybe our rulers object to the Maoist desire to impose a totalitarian vision upon the country by armed force. Has not the RSS relentlessly imposed a chimera named Hindu Rashtra upon us? Has it not descended to supervising mass murder for this purpose? We are constantly told there is no such thing as a moderate Taliban. But evidently there is a moderate RSS! Our drawing rooms and bureaucratic corridors are full of such moderates. They defend themselves by proclaiming their patriotism. But Naxalites are also patriots – they see themselves as inheritors of Bhagat Singh.

Why then does our governing elite refuse to confront the vicious practices of the Hindutva brigade? Why do they start talking about 1984

whenever anyone mentions 2002 – as if one massacre demands another? Or direct mild criticisms at the RSS for outdated economic ideas when the main issue is their perpetual effort to militarize civil society?

Our rulers want the poor to remain peaceful at all times but crush democratic resistance with the same ferocity as they do terrorism. They have reduced the criminal justice system to a cruel joke – it would not be an exaggeration to say that Indian justice is a machine for the production of insurgents. They want the Maoists to decommission their army, while the RSS is free to carry on as if it were a song and dance troupe. One homicidal maniac is named anti-national, while the other is hailed as a national hero. They even obtained for V.D. Savarkar – the architect of Gandhi's murder – the accolade of a portrait in the Central Hall of Parliament. Why not place Charu's portrait alongside? Both were extreme patriots. Both believed in political assassination, both hated Gandhi and both insisted that the end justifies the means.

Terrorism, a seamless whole

Let us not mince words. The constitutional order has been under attack from the outset of Independence, from Right, Left and Centre, if such categories carry meaning any longer. India's rulers regularly protect criminals, and part of the public is complicit in this. It is richly ironic to see this ruthless and corrupt ruling class throw the rule book at Maoists.

The world over, terror has become a seamless whole, connecting the CIA with *jehadis*, Pakistan with Al Qaida, the Indian government with the RSS, Indira Gandhi with Bhindranwale, Rajiv Gandhi with Prabhakaran, Assamese politicians with ULFA, Mumbai's elite with the Thackeray mafia, the British defence industry with Indonesian militias, Putin with Russian hitmen, the Chinese communists with Pol Pot and Burmese generals, Israeli Mossad with Palestinian Hamas. Indian politicians maintain links with Naxalites: not for dialogue, but mutual benefit. As boundaries, definitions and morals proceed from ambivalence towards meaninglessness, the only choice remaining is which God to invoke, which weapons to use, which civilians to kill. Which deaths to mourn and which to celebrate.

The extreme left has no interest in the question of fascism. If the situation calls for insurrection, we are already under a totalitarian regime,

so the question is irrelevant. An aside: would Lenin, Stalin or Mao have allowed intellectuals the space to conduct insurgent rhetoric? Some Maoists sneer at 'liberal-leftists' preoccupied with communal harmony. This is remarkable, given that tens of thousands of Indians have perished in the past three decades in incidents linked to genocidal politics.

The problem has deeper roots. We may note in passing the resonance between Savarkar, Jinnah and the CPI on the Two Nation theory. Whereas Savarkar in 1943 declared his agreement with the theory because Hindus were a nation by themselves, the same year CPI floated the idea of Muslim nationalities, and supported Partition by arguing that colonial India was a multi-national empire. There was no awareness of the fascist potential of communally defined nations. Ideology can blind the ones possessed by it.

Pakistan's crisis in 1970 could have been the starting point of a popular re-assessment of the anti-democratic partition of 1947. The CPI(ML) could have articulated a discourse devoid of the hateful views of communalists. But the leadership was incapable of formulating any viewpoint outside the framework favoured by the Chinese communists, for whom the question of sovereignty seems to have been settled by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648; and what goes on inside a nation state is no one else's business.

Dreamers of a classless society found it too utopian to question the partition of India. Consequently in 1971, Naxalites were the only Indian political current that supported Yahya Khan. They also advised revolutionaries in East Pakistan to defend Pakistan's integrity. This was in line with the Chinese preference for dictators in Sri Lanka, Sudan, Chile and Cambodia. All that counted was anti-Sovietism.

In four decades the Naxalite movement has rarely if ever confronted the communalists. During the late 1980s, an ultra-left group in Punjab defended Hindu villagers against Khalistani threats, but such tendencies are exceptional. Indian communists could have united to defend the Babri Masjid, but the utopian sound of this hypothesis shows where their endemic factionalism has taken them. Naxalites have shown no inclination to resist Hindutva. The assassination of a VHP Swami in Kandhamal in August 2008 was their first significant attack on a communal figure. Despite the Maoists' avowal of the deed, Hindutva forces retaliated against Christian villagers, killing nearly forty people and forcing tens of thousands to flee their villages. The comrades were unable to protect the people from the consequences of their actions.

The term *revolutionary violence* tends to disguise reality. If we were to say 'accidentally killing children; deliberately severing the limbs of, murderously assaulting and beheading certain people will definitely result in a happy future for humanity', things might look different. The practice of murder and face-to-face killing brutalises activists and creates shockwaves in society that outlast any gains to the intended beneficiaries. 'People's war' has added to the cycles of revenge already at work.

There is no doubt that the state and its vigilantes engage in brutal campaigns in defence of vested interests. Must socialists be equally brutal, or hold themselves to a different standard? There are valid points in the Maoist critique of corporate industrialisation. These points have been made by others, and there are many resistance movements that are not Maoist. The defining feature of the Maoist agenda is an insistence on killing. This is their responsibility, for despite all talk of the state declaring war and so on, the Naxalites declared war at their very inception. This is convenient for governments that want to tar all democratic resistance with the same brush.

What do the cruel deaths of Miss and Mrs Pringle-Kennedy signify? Or the death of a three-year-old son of a policeman? Or of the millions killed since then? Does the invisibility of certain victims give them a silent status? Perhaps the significance lies in their consignment to nothingness within the radical imagination. Not only are they dead, but their death has no meaning. This indifference to life is the mark of the nihilism that has overtaken the revolutionary spirit. It is sad to see the latter celebrate its subjugation by avowing the ancient cult of martyrdom.

There is an adage that says truth is the first casualty of war. Eternal war then casts us into a cloud of eternal deceit. But who is deceiving whom? It is difficult to accept that we might appear as heartless and stubborn to our enemies, as they do to us. Nevertheless, unexpected deeds can transform reality more than predictable ones. If Maoists were to renounce violence whilst challenging the government to demobilise the RSS, Salwa Judum and other right-wing militia, they would expose bourgeois hypocrisy and electrify the situation. As they could have done in other contexts in 1971 and 1992.

If any political groups wish to combine radical partisanship with the claim to represent society at large, they need to eschew the practice of historical murder. That would enable a forthright dialogue. No

'revolutionary science' can establish the need to kill. Truth does not have a class character; nor do grief, brutality and conscience. We are not yet in a completely Orwellian universe. Some things are neither Hindu nor Muslim, neither proletarian nor bourgeois. There is no war to end all wars, no ultimate death penalty that will put an end to all death penalties. Hindu Rashtra is not the final solution to the so-called 'minority problem', nor is 'people's war' the final answer to class exploitation.

A people's army is an oxymoron, because all armies get absorbed into the age-old, self-regenerative structure of militarism. Armies tend to belong to themselves; political armies lean towards totalitarianism. There are no final solutions to anything. Yearnings for finality are best quenched in avowedly metaphysical speculation, rather than in the political domain, where they have had sinister results. It is not so ironical that politburos are the last refuge of dogmatic faith. It is time for them to discard their special knowledge of the End of History and return to ordinary life.

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NOV 9, 2009, HINDUSTAN TIMES

The Other Side of Maoism

"There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic"
– Albert Camus

Spokesmen of Maoist extremism have recently expressed regret for beheading a police officer and explained their actions as a defence of the oppressed. Their comrades' brutality, they say, is an aberration. They cite instances of state violence to justify actions they claim are undertaken in self-defence. There is more to this than meets the eye. Maoist theory holds that India is a semi-colonial polity with a bogus constitution that must be overthrown by armed force. The comrades view all their actions as part of a revolutionary war. Their foundational documents declare armed struggle to be "the highest and main form of struggle" and the "people's army" its main organisation. In war, morality is suspended and limits cast aside. War also results in something the Pentagon calls "collateral damage." Is it true that Naxalite brutality is only an aberration?

On August 15, 2004, the Maoists killed nine persons in Andhra Pradesh, including a legislator, a driver and a municipal worker. On August 14, 2005, Saleema 52, a cook in a mid-day kitchen in Karimnagar was beaten to death by Maoists for being a "police informer." This was the second woman killed by them in a fortnight. A former Naxalite, Bhukya Padma 18, was hacked to death in Marimadla village on July 30. On September 12, 2005

it slit the throats of 17 villagers in Belwadari village in Giridih. Landmine blasts in February 2006 killed 26 tribals and injured 50 in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh. The victims were returning from religious festivals, and some from anti-Naxalite rallies. Another blast on March 25 killed 13 persons.

Some of these killings may be incorrectly reported, some carried out by local cadre on their own. But the comrades clearly believe in political assassination. Moreover, the decisions to kill are taken in a shadowy realm wherein the fault of the victim is decided by whim. Truth and falsehood are dispensed with because the Party is 'Always Right'. Their targets have no chance of appealing for mercy, and no one will be punished for collateral damage. And all this is justified because the Maoists are at war – a circular argument, because whether or not we are at war is another whim.

But there is an elephant in India's drawing room. Maoists openly defy the Constitution, which they say is a mask for a brutal order. Are not our mainstream parties equally contemptuous of the law? Why did the NDA regime try and do away with Schedule 5 of the Constitution, that protects tribal lands from encroachment? Why is it still being violated? Is there not prima-facie evidence of politicians' involvement in massacres in Delhi and Gujarat in 1984 and 2002? Why haven't they been brought to justice? In 1987, 40 Muslims of Meerut were killed in custody. Why did the case take eighteen years to come to court? The BJP and the Congress both supported the private army named Salwa Judum with disastrous consequences for Chhattisgarh's population. Even the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court criticised the states' recklessness. In 2007, the West Bengal government despatched an illegal armed force to crush its opponents in Nandigram. India's rulers regularly protect criminals, and part of the public is complicit in this. Policemen in dereliction of duty get promoted. Mass murderers are hailed as heroes. Why are we addicted to the double-standard?

Those who believe in virtuous murder are today calling upon the democratic conscience. Does democracy include the right to kill? Our left-extremists have changed the world for the worse. Along with right-wing radicals, they ground their arguments on passionate rhetoric and a claim to superior knowledge. Fighters for justice have become judge and executioner rolled into one – in a word, pure tyrants. Every killing launches yet another cycle of trauma and revenge. Will Francis Induvar's son ever dream of becoming a socialist? Should not socialists hold

themselves to a higher standard than the system they oppose?

Symbolism counts for a lot in Indian politics. If the Maoist party is interested in negotiations, I suggest a demand that will expose the hypocritical nature of our polity: ask the government to remove the portrait of V.D. Savarkar from the Central Hall of Parliament, placed there in 2003. If it cannot do that, ask it to place Charu Mazumdar's portrait alongside. Why not? Both were extreme patriots. Both believed in political assassination, both hated Gandhi and both insisted that the end justifies the means.

My suggestion will meet with indignation. But the deep link between these two currents of extremism is the unutterable truth of Indian history. Hindutva is the Maoism of the elite. In 1969, an ultra-leftist Hindi writer penned a diatribe titled *Gandhi Benakaab (Unmasked)* that praised Godse as a true son of India. In 42 years of activity, Naxalites hardly ever confronted the communalists; although to be fair, one ultra-left group in Punjab did combat the Khalistanis. The assassination of a VHP Swami in Kandhamal in August 2008 is the only example. The Maoists owned the crime, but the Sangh Parivar vented its wrath upon Christian villagers. Thousands were displaced and over 30 were killed. The comrades were unwilling or unable to prevent the carnage.

Savarkar's acolyte Nathuram Godse murdered Mahatma Gandhi. In 1969, the Justice Kapur Commission concluded that the conspiracy was hatched by Savarkar and his group. Sardar Patel said as much to Nehru in February 1948. If Savarkar deserves to be honoured by the Nation, so does Charu. Since the government is unlikely to accept this option, we may finally come to a debate about why one kind of political murder is anti-national, while the other is patriotic virtue.

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MAIL TODAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2011

What about the murdered kids?

Should the SC judges have glossed over the murder of Graham Staines' innocent children ?

The recent controversy over the Supreme Court's January 21 judgement on the Graham Staines' murder case is revealing. To begin with, Justices P. Sathasivam and B.S. Chauhan saw fit to make certain gratuitous remarks: "The intention was to teach a lesson to Graham Staines about his religious activities, namely, converting poor tribals to Christianity. It is undisputed that there is no justification for interfering in someone's belief by way of 'use of force', provocation, conversion, incitement or upon a flawed premise that one religion is better." It's not clear whether they're saying there *were* such grounds for complaint against Staines (the Wadhwa Commission found "no extraordinary increase in the Christian population in Keonjhar district between 1991 and 1998"); or if the judges were merely saying that the accused Dara Singh *believed* Staines to be converting people.

Be that as it may, following protests by Christian organisations and members of civil society, the judges modified their judgement on January 25. They deleted the reference to Dara Singh's intentions; and replaced it with the following: "more than 12 years have elapsed since the act was committed, we are of the opinion that the life sentence awarded by the High Court need not be enhanced.." It also replaced the references to "interference in someone's belief by way of 'use of force', provocation.." etc., with the sentence "There is no justification for interfering in someone's religious belief by any means." Christian organisations welcomed the

judges' decision to expunge or modify the two sentences, but the matter still carries grave implications.

The issue is not the rights and wrongs of conversion, which may be debated, but the citation of communal animus as a justification for murder. Undoubtedly some Christian evangelical groups use objectionable language and means to convert people. They can be countered by civic protest and legal proceedings – there are several laws regulating religious conversion. The issue before the Court was an act of pre-meditated murder, in which there were not one, but three victims. We are talking about the law, and Section 302 of the IPC.

The SC's modification remains tinged with sinister implications. It would appear that the changes were made in response to offended sentiment, rather than in recognition of a flawed argument. While the decision to spare Dara Singh's life is a welcome one, the reasoning supplied by the honourable Justices is disturbing. They say, "there is no justification for interfering in someone's religious belief by any means." The reference to religion has been watered down but remains. The implications are that (1) Staines was indeed so interfering – for which there was no official complaint, nor reference in the Wadhwa Commission report; and (2) that communal animus is a mitigating (rather than exacerbating) factor in pre-meditated murder.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the judges have rendered invisible (as regards the punishment meted out to the culprit) the deaths of two little boys, Timothy aged 6, and Philip aged 10. Even if Graham Staines was indulging in objectionable activity, he did not deserve to be murdered for his sins. And even if the Staines' were Christian evangelists, their children could hardly be guilty of offending any law or anyone's religious sentiments. If the extenuating factors relating to conversion apply to the murder of Graham Staines, what factors could possibly attenuate the crime of burning alive two small boys? The judges have allowed their consciences to erase even the natural sympathy we feel about their terrible plight. Their comments – before and after their modification – are tantamount to blaming the victims for their fate. They violate the spirit of the Constitution and the norms of human decency; and they add weight to the normalisation of violence in the Indian polity.

Judges are not elected officials. The judicial conscience is separate from public belief insofar as it cannot be led by popular prejudice or

stereotypical modes of thought. One such stereotype is manifested in the doctrine of collective guilt that may be found, for example, in the Biblical accusation that the blood of Christ lies upon the heads of all Jews till eternity. More generally, it vests in the idea that the sins of the fathers are visited upon their sons. This is one of the most noxious ideas in human history and has found its way into every form of communal ideology.

Early in 1985, I heard a justice of the Delhi High Court say something similar in response to the PUDR petition praying for the registration of cases in the matter of the carnage of Delhi's Sikh citizens in November 1984. The judge dismissed the prayer, saying, as he did so, that "there was a background to the killings." He was alluding to the murder of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. By speaking thus, he was alluding to the idea of collective guilt. There is indeed a background to everything, but surely no thoughtful person, let alone a judge, can argue that a crime committed by a member of this or that religious group somehow taints every member of the criminal's community. For a judge to suggest that communal hatred diminishes the gravity of a heinous crime is a travesty of justice.

The Supreme Court recently asked a minister to be temperate in his speech. Their own choice of words carries far more weight than that of any minister. Judges derive their authority from the seats they occupy, and society's trust in their fair-mindedness and wisdom. The Bench is superior to the persons who temporarily occupy it. That is why there is a constitutional provision for the impeachment of judges. It is within the realm of possibility that judges can commit contempt of court. The Staines' judgement comes close to exemplifying such contempt. The learned Justices could have endorsed the judgement of the High Court and left it at that. But they chose to act otherwise.

The central danger to the Indian polity is communalism, and it works via ideas and prejudice, not organisational affiliation. The Kandhamal cases, arising out of events initiated by the murder of Swami Lakshmanananda by Maoists in 2008, and followed by an orgy of collective retribution upon poor Christian villagers, will be adversely affected by this judgement. If our highest judges wittingly or otherwise provide barely disguised legitimation for criminal deeds, our Constitution is doomed. Speaking out against this judgement is the least we can do to atone for the cruelty with which little Timothy and Philip were deprived of their innocent lives.

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APRIL 2, 2011, INFOCHANGE AGENDA JOURNAL

Speaking freely

An introductory essay to Infochange Agenda's special number on free speech and censorship

> '*With force I have subdued the brains of the proud*'
> – Epigraph on the grave of Cardinal Inquisitor Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621), who presided over the condemnation of Giordano Bruno, burnt at the stake for heresy in 1600.

The essays contained in this issue of *Infochange Agenda* are engagements with the question of socially accessible truth. Images and spoken (or written) words are implicitly social, and the matter of constraints and deliberate distortions in them is very old. In fact, a look at the world around us might re-awaken thoughts of the Inquisition.

The essays are substantial and speak for themselves. The themes tackled by their authors have been addressed by them seriously and for a long time. They range from the debate about sedition, constraints placed upon historical inquiry, the political certification of literary awards and filmed images, to the censorship of journalists' reports. They cover experiences arising not just in India, but in neighbouring countries too; and they deal with issues generated not only by state policy, but by mass belief as well. This is as it should be, for the political control of speech and thought is not confined within national or ideological frontiers. For instance, the state manipulation of history is not merely a Russian (or Soviet) phenomenon. It reflects the widespread attempt by governments

and political ideologues to control the present via doctored accounts of the past. That is why history so often appears to be a political minefield. Here, as in related matters, the only sound option is to allow historical exploration to proceed without manipulation or intimidation, enabling truth to emerge through sustained debate and dialogue, and free access to archives.

A citation from Hannah Arendt that I often use for the sheer impression it made on me, reads as follows: 'Is it the essence of truth to be powerless and of power to be deceitful? And what reality does truth possess if it is powerless in the public realm?' To my mind, this meditation lies at the heart of the question of the freedom of speech and expression. Censorship and propaganda are mirror images of each other. Censorship is a passive form of propaganda and propaganda an active form of censorship. (Readers wishing to examine this proposition could read George Orwell's essay on euphemism, for which a link is provided below).

There are other questions, about the responsibility of the state and of citizens. Where may we draw the line between freedom of speech, hate speech and the incitement to murder? How ought the media to treat the reportage of hate-inspired acts, and the reproduction of images likely to inflame people's feelings? How do we deal with deceit and deliberate misinformation? These questions also relate to the violent conflict that surrounds us. If truth is the first casualty of war, it follows that a condition of perpetual warfare ('hot' or 'cold', involving internal or external enemies) implies an all-round assault on truth.

Modern warfare is characterised by ideological manipulation, on the assumption that public opinion is part of the battleground. The media lends itself to the political realm as a means of mobilising sentiment. Ideologies tend to mix reason with faith; and their adoption by the mass media strengthens the belief that truth is a purely relative thing, 'a mobile army of metaphors.' Media aside, a crass manifestation of commercialised venom is available for travellers to the Wagah border, where assembled crowds from India and Pakistan hurl patriotic slogans at each other every evening – egged on by tour operators making a fast buck. (Incidentally, this was not the case some twenty years ago, when I visited the border along with some friends. There was a friendly and convivial atmosphere then).

Must we resign ourselves to the belief that truth is just a line of vision,

one perspective among many, that everything is an interpretation? Has truth been abolished by politics? I believe not. There are indeed many interpretations of things and events, but to interpret anything, we must assume there is an object to interpret in the first place. To hold that all truth is class truth; or that everything worth knowing is already evident, in accordance with some established tradition; or in line with the interests of the Nation, the Community or some such permanently unquestionable entity, is to set the stage for an obliteration of language. The tendency to replace meaningful conversation by polemic and sentimental browbeating is apparent in the political domain, where cliches and holy cows are regularly fielded in order to manufacture animus rather than clarity.

In such a situation speech becomes equivalent to silence because no-one hears anyone. We cannot hope to engage with the crucial issues of our time if we continue to treat the pursuit of truth with such disdain. We need to remind ourselves that the 'violation of truth poisons everything gained by the violation', that for individuals as well as for public institutions beginning with the state, the assault on truthful communication is self-destructive. Dictators have learned this to their cost, and when such practices become common in democratic systems, they inaugurate the slide towards tyranny.

Truth and freedom go together. Questions of sensitive reportage of, say, communal violence may be approached via the practice of restraint, without intending to deceive and distort. It is possible to consider these matters as part of an ethic of responsibility, without succumbing to a dictatorial or nihilist contempt for truth. The authors of the essays contained in this issue have each in their own way made significant efforts to answer these profound questions.

I am grateful to Infochange Agenda for inviting me to edit this issue, and I hope these articles prove as thought-provoking for its readers as they were for me. There is a lot more that could be said on the theme of free public expression, but I am confident that readers will find a great deal here to pursue their interests further. My heartfelt thanks are due to the contributors and regards to all readers of Infochange Agenda.

End Notes and Further Reading

The article by Gita Sahgal, *Lacking Conviction: Amnesty International and freedom of speech,* deals with the politically contentious matter of free debate amongst human rights activists and their stance towards insurgent violence. Sahgal gives an account of her experience in dealing with these issues whilst working as Head of Amnesty International's Gender Unit. The article was solicited by me as guest-editor and does not reflect a position adopted by Infochange. Needless to say that is the case with all the essays published here.

Those interested in pursuing the debate could read this article: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/15/international-criminal-justice-yemen

On Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino

Cardinal Inquisitor Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621) presided over the condemnation of Giordano Bruno, burnt at the stake for heresy in 1600. Bruno was imprisoned for seven years in Rome during his lengthy trial. The charges against him were based on his books and on witness accounts. They included blasphemy, immoral conduct and heresy, such as 'Holding opinions contrary to the Catholic Faith and speaking against it and its ministers'; 'Holding erroneous opinions about the Trinity, about Christ's divinity and Incarnation'; Holding erroneous opinions about Christ; Holding erroneous opinions about Transubstantiation and Mass.. &c.

To hold a 'contrary opinion' or 'erroneous opinions' was a crime! Bruno's strategy consisted in bowing to the Church's dogmatic teachings, while trying to preserve the basis of his philosophy. He held firm to his belief in the plurality of worlds, although he was admonished to abandon it. Cardinal Bellarmino demanded a full recantation, which Bruno refused. Instead he appealed to Pope Clement VIII, hoping to save his life through a partial recantation. The Pope was in favor of a guilty verdict, recommending a sentence of death.

Bruno was declared a heretic and handed over to secular authorities. He is said to have told his judges: "Perhaps you pronounce this sentence against me with greater fear than I receive it". On February 17, 1600 in the Campo de' Fiori, a central Roman market square, he was burned at the

stake and his ashes dumped into the Tiber river. All of Bruno's works were placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum in 1603.

Absolutist modern ideologies live in the shadow of the Inquisition and perpetuate it. 'With force I have subdued the brains of the proud...'

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HIMAL, OCTOBER 3, 2011

The Mind of Brahma

All the moods of life, all aspirations towards serenity seem to reside at Kailash-Manasarovar.

In 2009 I undertook what was to be the most memorable journey of my life. There have been others as momentous in their implication, but I would have to think of a reason why this one was different. The trip to Tibet by air, road and foot was unmistakably a departure from the norm. It is undertaken mainly by pilgrims, to a place considered sacred by hundreds of millions of Buddhists, Hindus and *Bonpos* (followers of the pre-Buddhist Tibetan shamanistic religion). When the trip ended, I understood why.

The journey was motivated solely by the fascination for Manasarovar and Kailash on the part of our team leader and my dear friend Madhu Sarin, for whom it was the fifth pilgrimage in nine years. Her intense descriptions and photographs had kindled my interest, and although I knew I would accompany her someday, the declining health of my parents made it impossible to fix a date. As their only child, I had responsibilities that made it unthinkable for me to undertake a dangerous journey to places out of reach by telephone, from which it was impossible to return at short notice. And after my mother passed away in 2004, I was preoccupied with looking after my father, who died in 2007. It was all very painful, but with both gone the pilgrimage became realistic. As it turned out, it also acquired a transcendent meaning for me because I took along some ashes and relics of my parents.

At 15,000 feet, Manasarovar is one of the highest freshwater lakes in

the world. It has a circumference of nearly 90 km. Located in a remote part of western Tibet beneath the trans-Himalaya, the range is much older than the Himalaya. I leave it to the reader to study the information about this region and the history of pilgrimages. Many pilgrims take the Indian government's sponsored tours that began in the late 1970s after China permitted them. No one has climbed Kailash –although legend has it that Tibetan mystic Milarepa's ascent in the eleventh century marked the victory of Buddhism in Tibet. China reportedly permitted some Spanish mountaineers to climb in 2001, but this was resisted by the Tibetans, and the news was later denied by the Chinese government. German climber Reinhold Messner, who had declined a Chinese offer to ascend Mount Kailash in the mid-1980s, criticised the aborted Spanish attempt with the words, "If we conquer this mountain, then we conquer something in people's souls."

We arrived in Nepalganj, on the Indo-Nepal border, on May 22. The airport here is the hub for trips into the western Himalayas. Flights are dependent upon the weather. The aircraft are small (with a capacity of 19 passengers) and in heavy demand – bookings do not assure you of a flight. We waited for two days before catching a scary 45-minute flight that took us across ascending valleys, with tall mountains looming large before us, and landed on a gravelly mud strip in Simikot (9500 ft). We also saw helicopters taking off for the Tibet border – some pilgrims are transported within 30 minutes to the plateau! Tour operators apparently do not warn pilgrims of the danger of ascending from sea level to 15,000 feet in less than two hours. It's not surprising many people die of high-altitude sickness. We learned of one flight that took off with about a dozen passengers of whom three arrived dead.

The Karnali river valley

However, it's not tough if one acclimatises slowly. Our team included the cook Devi, the trekking guide Pradeep Ghale, team-leader Madhu Sarin, an Australian professor and me. We took ten days walking into Tibet, accompanied up to the border by a mule-driver and our luggage on his pack animals. He rode a small pony whom we named our 'ambulance *ghoda*'. Most other trekkers do this journey in half the time; however, Madhu wanted to do justice to both external and internal aspects of the

pilgrimage and paced us accordingly. En route we camped at wonderful places in forests, beside running water, through misty glades and meadows, sometimes in light drizzle. Early one morning at a camp site I heard the most enchanting birdsong.

There were difficult stretches. At places landslides blocked our way. In one instance the path had caved in, forcing us to make a difficult ascent up the hillside. We walked beside the Karnali, a tributary of the Ganga, and one of the rivers that originates in the Kailash region. North-western Nepal is a remote area, one of the zones where the Maoist insurgency began. Madhu recalled how on an earlier trip she had been accosted by Maoist fighters on horseback demanding contributions from trekkers (they gave her a receipt). The scenery kept changing, with forest giving way to scrub as we ascended. Succumbing to altitude exhaustion, we camped for two days and three nights at a beautiful meadow south of the Nara La pass (15000 ft). This prepared us for the ascent to Tibet.

When we finally reached the top of Nara La after a gruelling climb, a grand vision of the Tibetan plateau greeted us. Here we took photographs of ourselves around the *chorten* atop the pass jostling with sheep, goats and shepherds with little bundles of rice on their backs. This route has been a trade and pilgrimage path for centuries. *Chortens* are Buddhist stupas, often rapidly put together with stones, which are then added to by other passers-by. The top of every mountain pass in the region seems to be graced with a *chorten* and prayer flags fluttering in the breeze.

Entering Tibet

Entering the People's Republic of China at Hilsa was instructive. Here we connected with our Tibetan guide, a small truck and a Land Cruiser, sent all the way from Lhasa. We underwent medical checks, and as swine-flu was the epidemic of the season, were told to fill forms that asked whether we had 'been near pig'. Our luggage was examined carefully, and I realised that the authorities were especially concerned about reading material. As the guards rummaged among my clothing and toiletries, they came across bird books, Agatha Christie and P G Wodehouse. Then there appeared something that bothered them greatly: *The Rebel* by Albert Camus. It had a red cover and caused great alarm. Senior officers were summoned and flipped through the book with Orwellian suspicion. Books! Ideas! Tibet!

Rebellion! Red! I could almost see the paranoia at work. I tried in vain to assure them it was philosophy, written in the 1950s and harmless. It was of no avail since they didn't understand English. I had a nightmarish vision of being shoved back across the border – when at last they relented. Shivji had intervened. Or maybe Chairman Mao's ghost took pity on a retired Maoist. Albert would have been amused!

The first thing we saw after this was the body of an Indian pilgrim being readied for transportation into Nepal. We heard later that several pilgrims had died that year. We spent the night at a rest house in Taklakot, on the ancient trade route, now a major military cantonment, where we provisioned ourselves with foodstuffs, cooking gas and other necessities. The morning found us on a three-hour drive to Manas. It felt strange travelling on flat and arid surfaces after emerging from high mountains. The view of the Himalayas from the plateau is spectacular. No foothills are visible: you only see snow-clad peaks stretching far into the distance. They shone with a salmon-pink glow, as we passed through villages with exquisitely painted doorways and windows. After an hour, Kailash appeared on the horizon and Madhu stepped out of the vehicle to perform *sashtang-pranam* (a salutation). I was moved.

We drove a while longer and arrived at Rakshastal, the origin of the Satluj river. The vast lake glowed in brilliant aquamarine blue with Kailash clearly visible. Rakshastal is the mythological residence of Ravana, created by him to perform acts of devotion to Lord Shiva. Manasarovar, shaped like the sun, and Rakshastal, shaped as a crescent, represent brightness and darkness. Its water is salty, hosts no aquatic plants or fish and is considered poisonous by locals. We disembarked and spent some time on its shores.

Manasarovar

Shortly thereafter we arrived at Chiu Gompa, on the shores of the holy lake. The expanse of calm water, the sight of distant snowy peaks, the feel of cold air and clear sunlight and the vision of the sacred mountain dominating the skyline all took my breath away. Manasarovar and the peaks surrounding it struck me as an image of Indralok, the abode of the gods. It was cold: even in June there is ice on the lake's edge. We took a week on the *kora*, the Tibetan name for parikrama. Our equipment

included a kitchen tent, gas cylinders, food and medical provisions. We also carried some light cans of oxygen for emergencies.

The land was undulating plain, with stretches of scrub and marsh. The colours and moods of the lake were versatile: I once counted six different hues of blue. The southern side of the lake is dominated by the Gurla Mandhata peak, which looks like a celestial staircase. Around Manas we saw herds of musk deer running free and Tibetan wild asses (*kiang*). One day I saw a large black animal walking confidently some 100 metres away. It stopped for a while, enough for me to take a photograph. It was later identified as a Tibetan wolf. There were scores of exotic birds – plovers, ducks, the Ruddy Sheldrake and bar-headed geese. The creeks flowing into the lake teemed with fish – but no one fishes here. Dead fish found on the banks are used by shamans for medicinal purposes.

I only saw Tibetans and Europeans walking. Cavalcades of vehicles carrying Indians and Nepalis were completing the *kora* in three hours. They would stop at select places to throw hundred-rupee notes into the water – our Tibetan driver was amused and collected them as mementos. There are six monasteries (gompas) along the route, and we stayed overnight at two of them, otherwise camping at suitable places. Many devotees take a dip in the lake, but the cold water was too daunting for me! At one point I immersed a part of my parents' relics in the water.

The Kailash *Kora*

After completing the Manas *kora* in seven days, we drove to Darchen, a small town and army cantonment, the point where the Kailash *kora* begins. There are shops, eating places run by Chinese and Tibetans (in one of the latter I saw posters of Priyanka Chopra), and houses of mud and stone. It has some filthy official guest houses and cleaner Tibetan ones, at one of which we stayed. That evening we decided to make a quick trip up to the Gyangdrag gompa – this belongs to the Drikung sect, different from the Dalai Lama's Gelugpa school. The trip involved a bumpy ride up the stream descending from the holy mountain – the Kailash Chu.

Gyangdrag was founded in the 13th century and rebuilt several times. We saw beautiful *tankhas* and spoke with a friendly monk. We then pushed further to an abandoned gompa behind which Kailash loomed large, and nearer still, the rock-massif that represents Nandi the bull. I placed the remaining relics of my parents in Kailash Chu and we filled some bottles

with water. It was freezing cold, but I splashed some water into my eyes, with a sense that it might help me see things more clearly than before! Looking southwards we saw Rakshastal plus the Himalayas, including Nanda Devi.

Next morning, we headed westward from Darchen along a dirt track and entered the valley of Amitabaha, along the banks of the Lha Chu, beside which a motorable track goes a considerable distance. Many *yatris* proceed in jeeps up to a point where they get a darshan of Kailash and turn back. A dog began following us at a distance and remained with us for two days, reminding me of the canine that followed Yudhishthira on his last journey out of Hastinapura. A sense of timelessness filled me as I thought about the thousands of pilgrims who had walked the same pathways for centuries. Along the way we passed a sky burial site at Tarpoche, a place where in earlier times bodies of expired lamas were left to the elements and animals. We were warned about the ferocious dogs that frequent this place.

Soon we entered the stark valley that surrounds the mountain and passed by Choku Gompa on a cliffside, remote and barely visible. Kailash now appeared in full splendour. I took a photograph of the peak through a solitary stone archway named Shershung. Around the peak were ranged high crags of black rock, so sheer they looked like ramparts upon which no ice could remain. In a few hours we passed the west face, stunningly close, appearing like an entity with arms stretched outwards, welcoming the world-weary pilgrim. We made our first camp soon afterwards, as pilgrims on ponies made their way in the distance. There was ice nearby, and we slept amid sounds of running water.

The second day we walked to Drirapuk Gompa at 16000 ft, one of the oldest monasteries in the region. We felt tired, as the air had become thinner. It lies opposite the supposedly fearsome northern face, that I did not experience as fearsome. Throughout the trip, we saw Kailash clearly almost every day – something for which many pilgrims would be immensely grateful. Tibetans revere it as the residence of the tantric deity Demchog and his consort Dorje Phagmo (Chakrasamavara and Vajravarahi); and call it *Kang Rinpoche*, or Snow Jewel. They also believe their poet saint Milarepa spent several years here in meditation. For Hindus, Kailash is the manifestation of Meru, the spiritual centre of the universe and the abode of Shiva and Parvati. For Jains, Kailash is known

as Ashtapada, the place where their founder, Tirththankar Rishabhadeva achieved enlightenment. For the Bons, it is where their founder Shanrab descended from heaven. Bons walk the *kora* anti-clockwise, unlike other pilgrims.

The last stage took us across the Dolma La pass at 18,600 feet. It is a tough climb that we needed to complete by noon to avoid blizzards. On the ascent we passed Shiva Sthal, where Tibetans leave relics of the dead or their own blood. Nearer the top there is a rock reputed to carry the footprint of Milarepa. The entire route is studded with sacred sites, marked by *chortens*. There are no Shaivite temples along the way, presumably because the entire area is considered sacred. On the way we mingled with Tibetan pilgrims, as well as those from Europe and China. I also noticed discarded phials of what may have been Tibetan medicine for altitude sickness.

When we reached the top, cold and exhausted, we found an array of fluttering prayer flags, the older ones torn and colourless. This is the highest point in the *kora*, nearest to the crest of Kailash. Some pilgrims were performing *sashtang-pranaam*, others reciting the mantra: *Om Mani Padme Hum*. People were laughing and crying with joy, greeting the mountain as if reconciled with an old friend. It was an inspirational sight. I took some gulps of oxygen to reduce my exhaustion – but I can't say if it helped.

On the way down from Dolma La we saw Gauri Kund from a height – the 'lake of compassion' that mythology tells us Shiva created for Parvati, and where Ganesha acquired his elephant head. Someone had placed a large amount of *sindhur* (vermillion) on the rock from where we looked at it. It seemed deceptively close, but we decided not to go down. The path ahead now took us over a glacier, riverbeds, and dangerous rocky descents. After an exhausting day we camped on the banks of the Lam Chu river that lies on the eastern side of Kailash.

The fourth day was spent trekking back to Darchen. We spent some time at Zutulpuk monastery, associated with Milarepa. Towards the evening, we saw multi-coloured rocks in the gorge, and a Tibetan girl handling a large flock of yaks all by herself, with stones and a loud voice. Late evening was spent bathing (a luxury), eating a fresh meal (vegetable chow made by a young Chinese couple in a small shed), and preparing for departure.

It took four days getting back to Nepal. We had entered Tibet from western Nepal but exited it from the east via the Kodari border. Part of the journey was on a dirt track beside the Tsangpo, the Tibetan name for the Brahmaputra. And there were other beautiful lakes to be admired. As we approached the edge of the vast Tibetan plateau, the Himalayan peaks appeared as if they were rising slowly on a huge invisible platform. Then came the descent into the border town of Zhangmu/Kodari. The ride to Kathmandu brought us into green forests besides rushing water, muddy roads and passengers sitting on bus-roofs – a different world from the one we had just left behind.

It is two years since we walked around the sacred lake and the Snow Jewel Mountain. Whether Manasarovar is the reflex of Brahma's mind and Kailash the abode of Shiva or Chakrasamvara, I am in no position to say. But these beautiful myths are appropriate to the beauty and splendour of Manas and Kailash. My memories of that body of water, surging sometimes like an ocean, at times still as a sheet of glass, light shimmering outwards from its surface as if touched with a shower of diamonds, preserve a sense of transcendent things.

All the moods of life, all aspirations towards serenity seem to reside here. So they did to me at any rate, as I sat alone on its banks, bathed in sunlight on the last day of the *kora*, wondering how and why I was here, an agnostic man in a place venerated by millions, where devotees spent their most reflective moments, and some people still come to die. And Kailash, always visible from the lake's banks, towering above it, a point of stillness in a spinning world. There are indeed peaks that rise higher. But this one conveys steadfastness, absolution and mystery. No one knows if anyone has ascended it, save in myth. After I completed the *kora*, despite my physical tiredness, I felt rested. Had I really beheld the jewel in the lotus? The mountain and the water stay on with me...

Om Mani Padme Hum

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A Hard Rain Falling

The criminalisation of the polity intensifies with every instance of impunity

> *"He went to bed, turned on the BBC World News and switched it off again. Half-truths. Quarter-truths. What the world really knows about itself, it doesn't dare say"*
> – John le Carre in *Our Kind of Traitor*

A baleful feature of contemporary Indian politics is the subjugation of the mind to partisanship in the narrowest sense. All commentary appears as the standpoint of this or that party, and hence not worthy of consideration by anyone other than the faithful. Serious dialogue fades away, and all we do is hurl 'positions' at one another. Communalism is identified with one party, caste-ism with another, corruption with a third. Conversation is reduced to sloganeering. We forget that the polity as a whole exhibit all these complex phenomena, regardless of which party commands power. And we also ignore the more far-reaching inquiry, into the acceptability of controlled mobs, private armies, vigilante groups and political assassination. These bloodthirsty practices are driven by community honour, party loyalty, caste pride or pragmatic realism. One way or another, they signify a return to a pre-political condition imbued by the dogma that might is right.

The term *radicalism* (going to the root of things) is usually taken in a positive sense, although 'root' explanations can be simplistic. But

radicalism cuts across the political spectrum. What Right, Left and 'market' radicalisms have in common is dogma and fanaticism. It is not a party but a platform of political moderation that is lacking. I do not wish to gloss over the serious distinctions between various radical doctrines but will focus here on the similarities. These include the idea that independence is incomplete until their dogma attains power; the view that the Constitution and democracy should be used rather than respected (see below[1]); sustained attempts towards the ideological infusion of state institutions; a self-fulfilling vision of civil society as a theatre of civil war; and the maintenance of armed groups that can be 'spontaneously' deployed when required. This is the ground shared by enemies and it tends to remain unspeakable. All we have is the refrain: 'my violence is better than your violence'.

India has an old militarist tradition. It was called revolutionary terrorism in the early twentieth century and was represented by organisations such as Anusilan and Jugantar. One of its first actions was the attempt by Prafulla Chaki and Khudiram Bose to kill judge Douglas Kingsford in 1907. This resulted in the deaths of the wife and daughter of Pringle-Kennedy, a friend of the judge. Chaki and Bose are martyrs for nationalist hagiographers, although their bomb resulted in the first piece of collateral damage by Indian patriots in the twentieth century.[2] The tradition has many offspring, including Naxalites and Hindu *Rashtravadis*. The Maoist sensibility is deeply nationalist, and its basic conviction is the doctrine of just war. The Hindu Mahasabha leader V.D. Savarkar's favourite slogan was *Militarise Hindudom!* This linkage is unpalatable to many, but the ideological osmosis between these different forms of patriotic fervour was based upon their common belief in violent activism and the cult of martyrdom. It is visible in the personal accounts of revolutionaries, some of whom (such as the members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican

1 For example, the NDA's surreptitious attempt to nullify Schedule 5

2 For more on this episode, see *Permanent Spring*, in Seminar # 607, 2010; a copy of which may be read in this volume

Army) were drawn to anarchism and communism in the 1920s and 1930s.[3]

Subhas Bose's attraction to military force is well-known, and he remains popular amongst both rightists and leftists.[4] For its part, the RSS has been a paramilitary since its inception – an AICC resolution in November 1947 warned that "*the activities of the Muslim National Guards, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Akali Volunteers and such other organisations…represent an endeavour to bring into being private armies, (and) must be regarded as a menace to the hard-won freedom of the country.*"[5] The resolution dates from Sardar Patel's time, as does the ban on the RSS after Gandhi's assassination.[6] Since then, militarism has remained active across a broad spectrum. The Khalistanis organised 'commando forces' during the 1980s. Islamist guerillas see themselves as warriors of Allah and flaunt words like *lashkar* and *mujahid*. The North-East is teeming with generalissimos; and private armies such as the Ranvir Sena and Salwa Judum have been openly supported by mainstream parties.

By the late 1930s, revolutionary terrorism had made an ideological impact upon politics. In an era of global warfare, now there appeared dreams of liberation by an army of patriots, to be established via a compact with the enemy's enemy. One effect of Bose's military adventure was to sanitise Nazism in nationalist consciousness. The implications are disturbing. A Facebook site named *Lets Speak India* recently posted a photo of Bose shaking hands with Hitler. At the time of writing this, 508 people 'liked' it, and many of the 68 comments expressed high admiration for Hitler. A decade ago, a Delhi-based columnist reported a conversation

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3 See Mallikarjuna Sharma (ed, five vols); *In Retrospect: Sagas of heroism and sacrifice on Indian revolutionaries*; Hyderabad, 1999. Religious symbolism was evident in the murder by Naxalites of a police officer named Gorachand Sanyal in Baranagar in 1971. Sanyal's severed head was placed on a thali. Thereupon a female member of the squad decorated herself with his blood: A. P. Mukherjee; Maoist Spring Thunder: *The Naxalite Movement (1967-1972)*; Kolkata, 2007; p 16. Charu Mazumdar's incantation about communists needing to dip their hands in the blood of the class enemy is an expression of the ritualist significance that bloodshed carried for the Naxalites. Also see *The Other Side of Maoism* (available in this volume), where I argued that Hindutva was the Maoism of the elite

4 Though it must be remembered that in the 1920s, Tata Sons' management found it a point in his favour that the communists decried Bose as a 'Mussolini of Bengal's fascists'. See Dilip Simeon, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism*; Delhi 1995; pp 64-67; 347

5 *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (online) vol 97, p 480

6 Find the text of the order in D.R. Goyal: *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, Delhi, 1979; 201-202; and at http://www.sabrang.com/cc/archive/2004/aug04/cover1.html

Also relevant is Justice Kapur's Report into the *Conspiracy to Murder Mahatma Gandhi*: http://archive.org/details/JeevanlalKapoorCommissionReport

with the principal of an elite college, who recalled that over 60 per cent of the applicants for admission cited Adolf Hitler as their role model for having "given self-esteem to Germany." For many of our youth, the deaths of millions in wars and genocide are a mere throw of the dice. The disdain for history and the mania for glory are bad enough, but the normalisation of mass killing in the public consciousness should alert all democrats.

The communist attraction for People's War became pronounced in the late 1940s, when the CPI turned the anti-Nizam struggle into an all-out war against the Nehru government. After the Army action in 1948, the stalwart leader Ravi Narayan Reddy reportedly argued for a cessation of armed struggle. However, by this time the leadership had hailed Telangana as the 'Yenan of India', and denounced him as a traitor. One memoir recalls Reddy being sentenced to be shot and obliged to flee to Bombay.[7]

In the scientific stance adopted by Marxian socialists, the ethical and emotional aspects of political activity are not considered significant. Not only is this a deflection from the intensely moral roots of their own politics, it also points to the baleful consequences of reducing rationality to a mathematical dimension. Social consensus is a fragile entity, but how is it affected by partisan vigilantism? When people are humiliated or killed for furthering some cause, the emotional effects carry political ramifications. This is true even if the victims were 'collateral damage', and we know that communists have no problem citing this defence of their actions.[8]

T P Chandrasekharan was killed brutally, his face damaged beyond recognition. Whatever be the CPI (M)'s role in this, the fact remains that a Party secretary publicly avowed the practice of killing rivals – he even supplied details of the murders. Not long ago a primary schoolteacher was murdered in front of his students – we may imagine the impact of this upon the children. There is little doubt that the Party maintains and protects killer gangs in Kerala. In 2007 the CPI (M) deployed hundreds of armed men in vigilante actions in Nandigram. This happened whilst it was in power and could prevent the police from doing its duty. This disregard for the law had electoral consequences, but it also relates to broader questions regarding left-wing politics in India.

7 Mohit Sen; *A Traveller and the Road: The Journey of an Indian Communist*; Delhi, 2003; p. 125

8 "No people's war can be so clinical, as to have no civilian casualty... no class war can be conducted with clinical precision. It is very tortuous and painful..." *Maoists in India: A Rejoinder*, EPW; 14/10/06, by CPI (Maoist) spokesperson Azad.

The Maoists have made matters worse. (I leave out the Jnaneswari train massacre for lack of space). They beat the MNREGA activist Niyamat Ansari to death in Jharkhand after abducting him from his home. They have been known to hang perceived enemies upside down to die, and to kill policemen in their custody – one of whom was beheaded. What exactly is scientific about cruelty? What is its class character? How do such acts bring us nearer to a just society? Who amongst us looks forward to a state controlled by such people? Every such action creates a spiral of bitterness. The relatives of the dead are affected for a lifetime – some dream of revenge, some repress their feelings, but in any event, they are unlikely to be impressed by communist ideas. It is time for human rights activists to start investigating the social aftermath of communist violence.

Given the partisan ambiance of all political speech, these matters will probably dissipate into a cloud of jargon-laden accusations. Pejorative 'isms' will be flung about to rally the faithful. Ideologies function as stones in the head, rendering their adherents devoid of human empathy and impervious to dialogue. But if there were any link whatsoever between ordinary life and grand visions, that connection is seriously damaged by the experience of cruelty. For the victim, and those close to him, it is irretrievably lost – annihilation signifies the end of hope, beauty and meaning. Fascism, Stalinism, Nationalism, Liberalism and Communalism all merge into an undifferentiated nihilist morass. Time itself is fractured – those of us who remain alive bear the loss even if we continue to fight for good causes. This is what Gandhi meant when he said: "What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?"[9]

Death as punishment for loss of faith is reminiscent of the Inquisition, under which dissenters were burnt alive. Theological concepts such as heresy and blasphemy still operate amongst Leftists, giving them the aspect of medieval Popes or latter-day Ayatollahs. Murderous activities brutalise activists and create shockwaves in society. There is no doubt that goondas maintained by parties such as the Samajwadi Party and the Trinamool Congress conduct violent campaigns to defend vested interests. But Left politics was meant to be the civic sense of a (potentially) just order.

9 *Harijan*, 29-9-1940. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*; (online) vol 79, 257

This was what was implied in the saying: *there is another world, and it is in this one.*" Surely Leftists must hold themselves to a higher standard than the ruling classes?

Violence is the very grammar of exploitation and oppression related to class, caste, sex and race. It has always borne the tendency to break free of institutional constraints and become a force in itself. That is why bands of warriors are the most stable feature of class society. Capitalism thrives on violence.[10] Tragically however, the major communist currents, instead of providing a wholesome alternative to violent reality, have become an indistinguishable feature of it.

All these historical vectors converge in their effect upon the public sphere, which is undermined by the impunity of India's numerous controlled mobs. In 1984 the Congress transformed itself into yet another vehicle for communal hooliganism; and thereafter protected the criminals. This allowed the RSS to drag the very idea of moderate constitutionalism through the mud and slime. The habit of self-deceit progressed by leaps and bounds. For example, reports about communal incidents generally tend to name (or hint at) this or that community, but for 1984, a political category came into play: 'Congress killed Sikhs'. (Were there Bahais and Parsis on the streets?). Here too, mobs shouting communal slogans were desecrating shrines and killing people to assert the superiority of one religion over another. And many residents of Delhi were enjoying the spectacle.

But judging from the typical responses to any discussion of Gujarat in 2002, the RSS is delighted at the precedent – it enables them to say 'What of it? The Congress did the same in 1984'. For the Sangh Parivar, it appears that one massacre deserves another. One little fact tells a big story however – the number of BJP MPs elected to the 1985 Lok Sabha was precisely two, because Hindutva ideologues and their voters had switched to the Congress. This is why fascism cannot simply be reduced to partisan affiliations, even if some parties propagate fascist ideas whilst others make pragmatic adjustments to it. And the ruthless practice of certain Leftists completes the picture. What we are witnessing is the criminalisation of the polity – and I'm not referring to a headcount of MPs. The process

10 Force is the midwife of more force, whatever Marx may have thought of it. '*What is granted under fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts*': M.K Gandhi. *Hind Swaraj*; Ahmedabad, 2003; p. 60

intensifies with every instance of impunity.

In August 1939, the ex-Nazi Herman Raushning published a book named *The Revolution of Nihilism*. Speaking of the dissolution of thought, he said: '*To the conscious nihilist there are no ideas. But there are substitutes for ideas which can be foisted on the masses...The great paradox of this revolution is that its lack of principle is one of the main secrets of its effectiveness... how long can a State, a nation, a society, endure a governing elite devoid of all principle, without disintegrating?*' [11] The great delusion of our time is that 'revolution' is the totem of historical progress. There is indeed a revolution underway, but not of the communist fantasy. It is the revolution of nihilism, wherein ideas and virtues lose all meaning, human beings become mere instruments, 'action' is always imbued with violence, and everything is subsumed within a quest for absolute power.

Those swayed by Absolute Truths cannot understand that such language leads to an endless oscillation between domination and chaos. From now on, no left-wing politics can carry philosophical conviction if it fails to address the scourge of violence. The sad truth is that a faction-ridden communist movement has proven itself incapable of self-reflection when it comes to understanding its own decline.

Speak the truth
Stop the killing

11 Hermann Raushning; *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West*; New York, 1939, p 24-5

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Closing the Circle

The idea that a socialist movement needs to overthrow or capture something is a fanciful assumption that must be abandoned. Instead, there must be room for autonomy of thought and concerted action across a broader range of working class and popular movements.

"I look at the world and I notice it's turning
While my guitar gently weeps
With every mistake we must surely be learning
Still my guitar gently weeps"
– George Harrison and Ravi Shankar at the *Concert for Bangladesh,* August 1, 1971

Introduction

The word *revolution* came to acquire a new political usage from the late eighteenth century. Prior to that, it referred to the circular or elliptical movement of the celestial bodies, more specifically, to the completion of such a rotation. In English history, for example, it did not refer to the civil wars and political upheavals associated with Oliver Cromwell; but to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the installation of a protestant monarch in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688. It was only with the American and French revolutions of the late eighteenth century, that *revolution* began to signify an overhaul of a social and political system. Even here, the leaders active in the beginning appealed for a return to an order of things that had been sullied by despotic monarchs – they used nostalgic language, they sought a restoration. However, the war of

independence and the storming of the Bastille launched a flow of events that overthrew the earlier usages, along with the despotism that was the immediate target. *Revolution* began its new semantic journey, into the political vocabulary of modern protest and the aspirations of the oppressed. It retains its geometric usage, as in the number of revolutions per minute of mechanical rotors, but in the political realm, it evokes not a circle but a straight line, a pathway to a freedom and a better life.

In the nineteenth century the French Revolution became the archetypal model for an all-round transformation of the social and political order. It became the political embodiment of the Enlightenment ideals of the liberation of the human spirit and the sovereignty of reason. It proclaimed the freedom of the intellect from theological tutelage and the overthrow of the Divine Right of Kings as a principle of state legitimacy. The modernist project was best envisioned in Marquis de Condorcet's *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, a veritable manifesto of Reason. Ironically, in 1794, his exercise of the right to free speech in defence of political moderation was to cost him his life. Equally ironic is the habitual citation of 1789, a unique and singular event, as the basis for sweeping generalisations about the 'inevitable' stages of world history.

The Law of Progress

The late eighteenth century was the period when the idea of history took its modern form. Its new essence was the idea that History was the story of Progress. Gradually the entire vocabulary covering human aspirations towards freedom, justice and social emancipation was overtaken by an organicist concept of history, akin to the evolution of a living organism. This tendency was strengthened with the advent of Darwin's theory a few decades later. One offshoot of biological evolutionism was Social-Darwinism. The British philosopher Herbert Spencer coined the term 'survival of the fittest' in the 1860s to refer to Darwin's concept of 'natural selection'. A branch of Social-Darwinism was Eugenics, the 'science' of strengthening the hereditary qualities of a race, most notoriously advocated some decades later by the Nazis. For conservative European ideologues of the racialist anxiety that was current in the era of high imperialism, Darwin's ideas proved very attractive indeed. But the

extrapolation of the 'dialectics of Nature' into human history also took place within the progressive thought of the late nineteenth century, and this was rooted in the tradition launched at the time of the first great revolutions.[1]

Organicist concepts became a means of demonstrating the law-governed nature of reality. History was now deemed to contain the seeds of progress regardless of the thoughts and motives of humans engrossed in their welter of activities. Kant described these activities as 'melancholy haphazardness'. Hegel described the long sequence of bloody conflicts as a "panorama of sin and suffering." But, he said "even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized – the question involuntarily arises – to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered."[2] He went on: "The sole aim of philosophical inquiry is to eliminate the contingent...We must bring to history the belief and conviction that the realm of the will is not at the mercy of contingency. That world history is governed by an ultimate design, that it is a rational process – whose rationality is not that of a particular subject, but a divine and absolute reason. The time has now surely come for us to comprehend even so rich a product of creative reason as world history. The aim of human cognition is to understand that the intentions of eternal wisdom are accomplished not only in the natural world, but also in the realm of the [spirit] which is actively present in the world. *From this point of view our investigation can be seen as a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God*." (emphasis added) [3]

Theodicy is a fascinating concept, and it is significant that Hegel used it to describe his investigations. It can be defined as the doctrinal vindication of (otherwise inexplicable) evil in terms of divine providence. In other words, it points to God's plan to squeeze Good out of Evil. There are many kinds of theodicy; and paradoxically, some are secular in

1 One example of the extrapolation of natural law into human history is Narendra Modi's citation of Newtons third law: *To every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction*, as a means of justifying state-enabled terror in Gujarat post the Godhra incident in 2002. Another is Rajiv Gandhi's 1984 metaphor about the earth shaking when great trees are uprooted. The earthquake metaphor has also been used by pro-RSS commentators talking about 2002.

2 G.W.F Hegel; *The Philosophy of History*; Dover Publications, New York, 1956, p 21

3 G.W.F. Hegel. *Introduction to the lectures on the philosophy of world history*, CUP, 1975. pp 28, 42

orientation. It is evident that radicals of all kinds (including messianic nationalists) are attracted to this idea, even if they are unfamiliar with the term itself. In the case of secular theodiceans, God's role is taken by History, which justifies evil deeds performed by the cadre of whichever party is supposedly leading us to the pre-determined goal. In their philosophical compulsion to make sense of the turmoil of centuries, both Kant and Hegel attempted to discern reason at work in the passage of time. Ultimately, Time brought about reasonable changes in human behaviour and institutions. History as the unfolding of the Spirit was seen to be the bearer of these already-present positive tendencies. Just as the seed contained the tree *in potentio*, so did the seed of historical time contain the tree of ultimate reconciliation. Thus, Hegel said: "nothing else will come out but what was already there." (This was another way of saying that there is nothing new under the sun). Thus did Hegel develop his grand philosophical system, the attempt at a complete speech, wherein reason gave an account of itself without recourse to an external ground.

However, whereas Hegel saw the present as the organic outcome ('ultimate design') of the past, Marx and the revolutionary tradition turned history into the arena for the *future* emancipation of the proletariat. In its revolutionary avatar, politics became conflated with History. As a result, the revolutionary tradition began to measure itself and its activities with the stages of historical development that were deemed to be built into the history of all countries. No theory of politics was required, because all political questions were subsumed under the rubric of the Transition. Crucial issues such as the nature, form and legitimacy of political representation, the so-called sovereign Will of the People or Proletariat; the requirements of law and justice; the separation of powers; the phenomenological (rather than tactical) understanding of violence and its relation to politics; and the ideals of freedom and democracy and their implications for workers, were set aside in the face of the imminent Revolution, preparation for which took precedence over all else.

Revolutionary activity

Revolutionary activities in India are closer to the original meaning of *revolution* than the comrades realise. Revolutionary parties ground themselves upon rebellious sentiments and sacrosanct doctrines. The

most significant of these doctrines is that the proletariat has a historical goal, and that there is only one correct strategy that can lead it towards that goal. This strategy is accessible to the scientists of socialism, who are grouped together in the Communist Party. In the minds of its cadre, the party assumes the shape of some kind of incarnation of the working class. (I leave aside the question of the relationship between the early terrorist groups and the left-wing parties of the 1920s). Given the fact that real life always tends to fall short of tall claims and utopian ideologies, sooner or later its cadre tends to become conformist or cynical. They raise questions of bureaucratism and dogmatism – most of the time this indicates a preference for a slightly different set of dogmas – and the party splits. A new vanguard is set up with the same broad organisational and doctrinal beliefs as the old one, and with some minor changes in the title of the party. Apart from doctrinal issues, the dominant narrative in such splits is that of betrayal. The old leadership is deemed to have betrayed the revolutionary path, and the new entity represents the apparent recuperation of genuine revolutionary forces for the benefit of the People. Thereafter the pattern is repeated in a new cycle.

This cyclical vacillation also happens with regard to the status of armed struggle in the activity of revolutionaries. In 1948-50 the CPI converted the Telangana movement into an all-out insurrection against the Nehru government, and launched what Mohit Sen referred to as 'Naxalism without the Naxalites'. In the face of repeated setbacks, a CPI delegation went to Moscow in 1950 where they were told by Stalin to call off the armed struggle and participate in Indian democracy for whatever it was worth. Less than two decades later, the party split twice, first in 1964 (after the 1962 Sino-Indian war) and then again with Naxalbari, in 1967. Charu Mazumdar and his followers denounced the CPI (Marxist) for betraying the Revolution, and also raised questions on dogma, lack of democracy etc. A fresh attempt at organising armed revolution began in 1969. After the first year there was a crisis, as Charu's line did not seem to be working even where it was faithfully carried out, as in Midnapur. The leadership sent a senior comrade to China (via an interesting route: Rome, Tirana, Dacca, Peking) and he returned with news of the Chinese Party's (CPC) sharp criticisms of Charu's annihilation line. The CPC was also believed to have

criticised the slogan *China's Chairman is our Chairman*.[4]

Around 1971, splits appeared once more on bureaucratism and points of dogma. The really big political and moral crisis was the Chinese defence of Pakistan's integrity at a time when Pakistan's Bengali population was being slaughtered by its Army.[5] Suddenly in late 1971, it appeared that Mao's chosen successor Lin Piao was a Soviet agent and had died trying to escape to the USSR. Despite all this, the habit persisted of treating the CPC as an oracular source of wisdom. The Naxalites split into pro and anti-Lin factions, and Charu's obsession with annihilation came under attack.[6] Thereafter new vanguards were set up, and participation in mass democratic activity was begun, although within the ambit of a doctrinal affiliation to armed struggle. After a while, some very revolutionary comrades denounced as traitors those taking part in peaceful agitations and re-started the armed struggle. And so on. Now, there are signs that yet again comrades waging People's War are having second thoughts.

Am I the only person to get the impression that revolutionaries are going around in circles?

Revolutionary habits

Let us now consider some of the long-standing habits of revolutionary behaviour. At the philosophical level, I have already referred to the implications of reducing political questions to historical ones. At the level of political conduct, the most striking of these habits are as follows:

- The tendency to invest politics with the aura of a permanent moral crusade.

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4 In the late 1960s young Naxalite comrades would proclaim their revolutionary ardour by adopting extreme postures over trivial things, such as insisting that Mao be referred to not as Comrade but as Chairman. The greater the degree of mindless adoration you professed for Mao Tse Tung, the more revolutionary you were proven to be. This tendency persists today in the social networking media, where the high degree of outrage being vented indicates the presence of lots of revolutionary zeal. Maybe revolution is around the corner, as it was forty years ago.

When the first phase was over, one unknown Calcuttan caught sight of the wall-slogan Cheener Chairman Amader Chairman (*China's chairman is our Chairman*), and wrote beneath it this riposte: Aar Japaaner Raja Amader Raja (And Japan's king is our king!)

5 An account of the Bangladesh crisis and its impact upon the Naxalite cadre, may be read in my novel *Revolution Highway*, a fictional reconstruction of those times.

6 I have discussed the hold of militarism upon the Indian revolutionary tradition in an article entitled *A Hard Rain Falling* (EPW, July 14, 2012); which may be read in this volume

- The search for heretics, the unmasking of enemies disguised as comrades (*aasteen ka saanp).*
- The hatred of hypocrisy, the habit of being permanently on guard against hypocrites.
- The habit of sneering at everyone outside our circle (the use of wit as substitute for wisdom).
- The insistence on doctrinal purification as a prerequisite for joint action.
- The belief that there is only one 'correct' course of action in any situation.
- The incursion into political speech of personal attacks (*ad hominem* remarks).
- The imputation of base motives as an explanation for ideological disagreement.
- The citation of superior knowledge and sincere intentions as proof of our Goodness.
- The claim that our deeds cannot be judged by our peers, but only by future generations.
- The claim that if we are being cruel, it is only a means of being (Historically) kind.
- The conviction that collateral damage is only something our Enemies do, not us.
- The conviction that since we ourselves are very worthy, everyone else must be worthless.
- The idea that radical rhetoric establishes one's commitment to the public good; and that –
- The more violent the proposed solution, the more admirable the character of its proponent.
- The tendency to enjoy victim status, whilst overlooking the plight of those whom we victimize.

Let us examine these habits a little more closely. One broadly held assumption is that the analysis of the socio-economic situation suggests its own determinate activity – that is, the Correct Analysis points to the Correct Line. But the problem is that we have no independent means of verifying a correct analysis. In fact, we can't even agree on the standards that might help us distinguish a correct analysis from an incorrect one. If antagonists in an argument cannot agree on what might (hypothetically)

lead them towards agreement, then there is no likelihood of their ever agreeing on anything. Speech becomes equivalent to silence. They are doomed to disagreement, given the other problem (which is a logical precursor to the first one). The problem is that 'scientific' revolutionaries tend to insist that all truth is class truth.[7] This view is akin to Nietzsche's perspectival view of truth, because it contains an infinite regression: any depiction of the reality of truth can also be described as a class truth.

With such an attitude, no objective statement may be made about anything at all. Once the tension between subject and object is abolished and only the Subject remains, all theories become interpretations. (This is regardless of whether the Subject in question is the solitary bourgeois individual or the equally solitary Politburo of the Party, contemplating History on behalf of the working class). Furthermore, we are left with no means of discriminating between historical events and accounts of those events. We may believe anything we like about the Russian revolution, Stalinism, Nazism, the wars of the past century, the fate of the USSR, the emergence of Chinese capitalism etc., because "all truth is class truth", our Party is the true vanguard of the Class, and anyone who has a different historical account is a class enemy, QED. In fact, the very appearance of a different account is proof of the arrival of an enemy. For a long time now, scientific revolutionaries have contributed to the destruction of the very idea of objectivity. George Orwell wrote about all this more than six decades ago – but then he was an enemy, was he not?

To return to the assumption that the Correct Analysis points to the Correct Line: is this an accurate description of revolutionary decision-making? Might it not be the case that this or that analysis is deployed as a means of justifying a line we have already chosen for some other reason altogether? Understanding these habits requires psychological insights. In her book *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt discusses Maximilien Robespierre's obsession with hypocrisy and virtue, and his conversion of politics into a limitless moral pursuit. She cites R.R. Palmer: "The hunt for hypocrites is boundless and can produce nothing but demoralization." For Robespierre, patriotism was a thing of the heart, and that made it impossible to distinguish between true and false patriots. All actions became suspect because the virtuous leaders were always on the look- out

7 A closer look at this issue is contained in my essay Permanent Spring, in Seminar # 607; which may be read in this volume

for hypocritical motives. But motives are never so transparent, even to their owners. Making the purity of motives into a touchstone for participation in democratic politics is a recipe for disintegration. "Robespierre carried the conflicts of the soul... into politics, where they became murderous because they were insoluble."[8]

Outside the circle

Where does all this leave us? We do need a rejuvenated politics, one that pays regard to the old social-democratic ideals of rendering the process of production amenable to popular control; a more democratic daily life, and a more secure life for women and children.[9] We also need to re-think the modernist stance of looking upon nature as a zone fit for technological conquest by humans. The range of problems facing humanity, not just in South Asia but the whole world, is staggering. All these things are well-known and need no recounting. At issue are the thoughts and practices with which those who see themselves as socialists, engage with these problems.

The continual recourse to *ad hominem* argument and the search for base motives has become a habit with leftists. Such destructive forms of speech were always in use by communalists. Whatever you said that sounded disagreeable to me was because you were a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, etc. All ideas were reduced to a sign of your identity, a symptom of some kind of mental disease that you inherited along with your DNA. This replacement of ideas by accusations is destroying the autonomy of thought. Communists were fond of saying "your ideas reflect your class character". (Mostly it was petty-bourgeois leftists denouncing the class character of other petty-bourgeois leftists). Nowadays we have regular references to someone's caste as a reason for dismissing their ideas. *Ad hominem* methods have become the norm in public debate, which is another way of saying debate has come to an end. The reason is obvious – this is a double-edged sword. Every inconvenient view may now be dismissed on the ground that the person uttering it is a bad person by definition, and/or is incapable of thinking except in stereotypes. The very

8 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*; Penguin Books, 1979; p 97

9 These issues are addressed in a collective document issued in May 2011 calling for a rejuvenated left-wing politics: https://dsimian.com/2024/06/16/end-of-the-left-in-india/

point of speaking is lost. We may as well remain silent.

The favourite norm of communication among revolutionaries is the polemical style. They are forever denouncing and sneering at others. Coupled with their congenital vanguardism, this style sabotages conversation before it can even begin. The sooner it is discarded, the better it will be for the comrades themselves, not to mention the general public. The assumption that doctrinal purity is a prerequisite for political action; implies that complete agreement is (a) possible (b) necessary. Is this true? I think not. The comrades' disregard for vast numbers of concerned persons who are neither Marxists nor materialists, is just a means of isolating themselves. This isolation is not offset by their sense of superiority – fewer people are listening to their ideas anyway. They look increasingly like an archipelago of exotic religious cults, whose jargon and solutions are of no practical significance. Thus, the idea that a socialist movement needs to *overthrow* or *capture* something, is one among many fanciful assumptions. It needs to be set aside, along with the expectation of an apocalyptic confrontation. More respect and attention needs to be paid to quotidian activity related to livelihood, human rights and justice. Socialists need to invent modes of organisational practice that allow for autonomy of thought as well as for concerted action *across a much broader range of popular and working class movements* than has hitherto been attempted.

And finally, they need to give up the fascination with violence and martyrdom. Karl Marx's unfortunate choice of gynecological metaphors has had a sorry effect upon the leftist intellect. The tendency for violence to become a force in itself becomes more obvious with each passing day. The stamina of private armies and vigilante groups in India is a grievous problem, which I have discussed in the article mentioned in footnote 7 above. The lowest common denominator for democratic political activity is the respect for human life. It is true that the ruling class is brutal, but socialist politics must measure itself by a different standard. Otherwise the system will not change – we will see only a change in its personnel.

Modern politics plays with the psychology of delayed gratification, a form of mental manipulation essential to the capitalist system. This is the market fundamentalists' version of prayer. One consequence of this psychic condition is "the peculiar restlessness and dispersion of our modern consciousness" noted by Hegel. Whereas sadness and happiness are part of the normal rhythm of life, the leaders of revolutionary

enterprises (and that includes the capitalist revolution) constantly tell us to accept sadness today in order to be happy tomorrow.[10] Advocates of the Bright Future busy themselves in drawing and re-drawing instructions on how we may arrive there.[11] Nowadays these bubbles of stimulated euphoria are bursting at a faster pace than before. It would be better for us to define our political projects along more practical lines, learn to speak with moderation, and act to bring about reforms that we wish to see in howsoever modest dimensions they can be achieved.

Towards the end of his famous essay *The Rebel*, Albert Camus remarked that "calculated revolution" prefers "an abstract concept of man to a man of flesh and blood." Forgetting its own generous origins, it denies existence and puts resentment in the place of love. Real generosity towards the future said Camus, "lies in giving all to the present". It is time to step outside the *kaalchakra* and begin afresh. Who knows? We could surprise ourselves, and something truly novel might yet transpire.

Hamse mut poochcho kaise
Mandir tootaa sapno ka
Logon ki baat nahin hai...
Yeh kissa hai apno ka
(Don't ask how or why these dreams lie fragmented/
It is not about the others/ But about us)

10 Stanley Rosen; *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*; 1999. See the chapter named *Sad Reason*.

11 It is this kind of pipe-dream that resulted in the joke current in the last years of the USSR: Question: "Papa, what is communism? Answer: It's like the horizon son, an imaginary line that retreats as you approach it."

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MAY 4, 2013 BOOK REVIEW IN *NORTH EAST REVIEW*

Superfluous people

A review of Rahul Pandita's book, Our Moon has Blood Clots: The Exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits

> "Normal men don't know that everything is possible"
> – David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*

This is a childhood memoir that grows into a bittersweet chronicle. It is not a history of Kashmir, though it deals with historic events. Pandita was an eyewitness to the enforced migration of the bulk of the Valley's native Hindus. The book begins with a brief survey of Pandit culture and myths, an account that reminds us that Pandit lives and history were a part of Kashmir. A series of cameo sketches skillfully put together take the reader through memories of a family home in a house built with love, the books in its almirahs, childhood friendships, schoolboy days, fruit orchards, visits to cinema halls and temples, of boyish flirtations and feasts and rituals on ceremonial occasions. The story speaks about communal feelings over Indo-Pakistan cricket matches, including the India-West Indies encounter in Srinagar in 1983, when Jamaat-i-Islami banners were displayed in the stadium, and the crowd jeered at the Indian players.

Towards the late 1980s there were portents of bad days ahead, with a young man from the neighbourhood beaten up by the Border Security Force after a street fracas, and the milkman advising the author's mother not to spend money on the house, which would soon change hands. There

were bomb blasts in 1988, and displays of fitness exercises by young men who, it was later surmised, were among those who had returned from arms training camps across the border. A Pandit woman was killed in a blast in March 1989, and a male political activist named Tika Lal shot in his home in September. In June pamphlets warned Muslim women to comply with Islamic standards of dress and Pandit women to mark their foreheads for identification. A Hindu shrine was gutted in September, and a wireless operator of the Central Reserve Police shot the same month. Islamist slogans became more audible and there were further bomb attacks on banks, wine shops and cinema halls. In December 1989, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was appointed Union Home Minister by the V P Singh government. Soon afterwards, his daughter was kidnapped and released in exchange for captured militants. The *tehreek-i-azadi* had begun. The book takes us through these frightening times from the vantage point of a teenage boy in a Pandit family.

Nationalism

Ours is an era of superfluous people. Or we could say that it is an era of nation-states, a political concept that is characterised above all, by the impulse to render some amongst us superfluous. Nation-states were formalised by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which had to re-draw the map of Europe after the disintegration of four multi-national empires, including the Ottoman and Hapsburg. Conceived in Woodrow Wilson's ideal of a world order based on self-determination, they were designed as marriages between territory and ethnicity. The underlying assumption was that all nation-states possessed a natural core, conceived as an ethnically homogeneous *majority* – a concept that rendered all heterogeneous elements into something called *minorities*, bearers of a 'question' or a 'problem'. Nation-states soon became institutional arenas for majoritarianism, a political-arithmetical device for the transformation of the state from being an instrument of law into an instrument of the 'Nation'. They were doomed from the start, because homogeneity was a chimera, and also because the international order was incapable of protecting the people who were deemed to be a problem. The several Nations soon transferred the matter to the police, the Gestapo being the

most notorious example.[1]

The disastrous and bloody events of the 1930s leading up to the Second World War were – in part – a ramification of the vengeful and exclusivist nationalist ideologies that had risen in central Europe and Japan. The era of chauvinist nationalism cast a long shadow over anti-imperial movements in the colonised world as well, where majoritarian doctrines were espoused by contending elites. Hindutva and Muslim nationalism were the Indian variants of these projects (Zionism was another prominent example) to conquer the state in the name of the Nation. I would qualify this by noting that whereas the birth of Pakistan took place as an avowedly Muslim majority nation, the status of Hindutva in India remains that of an aspirant for hegemonic power, albeit one that has entrenched itself in the Indian polity.

One consequence of these doctrines was the need to deal with and/or subjugate those deemed to be minorities. Such peoples were then made the target of a spectrum of policies designed for a surplus population. They became refugees, doomed to live in ghettos, or as stateless people, or a people denied the basic protections of law. The Nazi regime invented the Final Solution, viz. extermination. The enormous growth in numbers of stateless people in the world, many of them in South and West Asia, is testimony to the inevitable demographic outcome of modern nationalism. In a word, minorities in a nation-state are those marked for special treatment. Liberal nationalists mark them for protection, fascist nationalists for permanent intimidation. Modern nationalism is a form of prayer, a sacral discourse with a 'chosen race'. It is an ideology that carries a propensity to render some of its subjects superfluous. The words *majority* and *minority* are an expression of a doctrine that posits natural belonging for some, superfluity for others.

In the early 1990s, it appeared to me that the Kashmiri agitation was in a way, a refusal to accept the partition of 1947. How much more powerful the cry for *azaadi* would have been had it been unmarked by communal affiliation, had the superfluity of Pandits not entered the domain of possibility; had they not been denied their Kashmiri identity. But that was not to be. Who is a Kashmiri? Is it an identity automatically carried by

1 For a more elaborate discussion of this theme, see my essay The law of killing: a brief history of Indian fascism; in Jairus Banaji, (ed), *Fascism: essays on Europe and India*; Three Essays Collective, Gurgaon, 2013

all those who reside in the various parts of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu & Kashmir? Is it the emblem of those who speak Kashmiri? Or of those who reside in the Valley? Who defines the *self* of self-determination? Does definition bestow ownership over the 'people' defined? Ironically, the one thing that binds Kashmiris to India is an indisputably Indian phenomenon called communalism, that armoury of ghastly abstractions about Hindu-ness and Muslim-ness whose sole aim is sovereign power and whose sole accomplishment is the devastation of daily life for everyone in whose name it speaks.

The Kashmir conflict may be seen as a product of contending nation-statist projects. As a result, Kashmiris have been subjected to competing strategies of ethnic cleansing, and ruthless policing operations. Two mutually hostile nationalist ideologies have been at work here (and of late a third nationalism has emerged), attempting to mould an ideal 'people' out of an ethnically mixed population. All three have failed, leaving Kashmiris mutilated, yet having re-iterated an implicit set of questions: what is a nation? Is it the land or the people, and who are the people?

Divergent truths

1989-90 is the date which Pandita marks as the point at which the truths of Kashmiris diverge. For some it was the beginning of a freedom movement, for others, the beginning of exile. It would be too facile to classify these divergent opinions into straightforward community divisions, for the targets of the militants included Muslims deemed to be traitors or informers; and among the Pandits there were those torn between fear on the one hand and lifelong attachments to home and friends on the other. Some migrants returned briefly in 1990-91, only to be targeted once again. As always in a tale so complex, the devil is in the detail. But even though many Kashmiri Muslims too fled the troubles, a binary understanding of it crystallized over the years, as horrific and tragic events tumbled upon one another burying even the recent past under the debris of broken life. And Pandita reminds us how justice always eluded the refugees, for even a self-proclaimed killer of Pandits could not be convicted due to the 'total disinterest' of the public prosecution. This has been the norm in hundreds of similar murder cases.

Pandita's re-telling of his uncle's memories of the tribal raid into Baramulla in 1947 is vivid and brings to life the devastation first

experienced by members of his family as a consequence of the dispute over Kashmir's accession. We get a sense of the religious distinctions experienced by a composite population – distinctions that were never glossed over, but never even close to the enforced monolithic fabrications that they have become. The Pathan raiders, first reported as Kazakhs were seen as barbarians, but those resisting them included Maqbool Sherwani, a National Conference worker and friend of the narrator (the uncle), who misled the intruders towards paths away from their destination, and paid the price for his good-neighbourliness by being nailed to a cross and shot. Not before shouting 'long live Hindu-Muslim unity'. Within the knowledge and vocabulary of religious differentiation and even animosity, Kashmiris retained an awareness of other forms of identity. There was an acceptance of these differences that did not encompass or call for total division and mass migration.

The last segment of the book relates events closer to contemporary events, including the state government's apparent complicity in taking over selected Pandit-owned lands 'for public purposes'; the rampant corruption in the deployment of funds meant for resettlement colonies outside Jammu (are corruption and communalism the only truly Indian habits that bind us together?); the sad experiences of those who choose to return to the Valley under the PM's resettlement plan of 2008 to especially-built colonies for returnees. Here too, the story is painful. Apart from bad living conditions, they face rejection and resentment from their fellow-Kashmiris. Not to mention sexual harassment and innuendo. The five colonies under the scheme are ghettos. Nowhere do they restore to their inhabitants the free lives of composite communities that they left behind more than two decades ago.

Our strangers

Pandita's account contains serious ramifications, a few of which need to be mentioned because they arise directly from the text, which recreates the halcyon atmosphere of the author's childhood and the manner in which it was pierced by an unexpected animus. One question that arises is the pre-history of such animus. When and why had it incubated to the point where it could be directed towards the goal of expelling vast numbers of people? Another point is the systemic manner in which violence and brutality

was deployed to create a climate of intimidation; and the many instances of complicity by neighbours and known acquaintances. This is a known feature of communal crises in the sub-continent, where violent ruptures in the pattern of daily life become an occasion to settle personal scores and/or grab property. Pandita describes a frightening experience one night, when young men gathered outside their house and spoke in loud tones of how they planned to take over various Pandit homes. There were also expressions of lust for Pandit women.

These behaviour patterns are a reminder that communal animus is not alien to ordinary people, or imposed on them by evil politicians; rather, it is a part of us. The racism propagated by right-wing movements in the western world have been known to attract mass working-class support. If evil persons incite us, we still need to be willing to be incited. The 1984 killings in Delhi were not merely engineered by political hoodlums. (It is worth remembering that some of the late Sanjay Gandhi's close associates were the leading lights of the violence, and that the bulk of BJP voters transferred allegiance to the Congress in the 1985 elections). The carnage in the streets was witnessed by ordinary people, and in some areas celebrated as a festival. It is precisely because communal animus is so deeply embedded in the minds and hearts of humble people, that it can assume the form of a mass ideology. The extra-ordinary lies very close to the ordinary. And it is quite possible for the apparently conflicting compulsions of revenge and remorse to co-exist in the same person. We are at war with ourselves. Civil war has entered our entrails.

The third ramification is (what appears to be) evidence that the slogan for *azaadi* was at its inception combined with the desire to rid the Valley of non-Muslim Kashmiris. It was not just the 'use' of religious symbols but an expression of a passionate conviction that looked upon Pandits as representatives of an oppressive system. Slogans such as *Eiy zalimon, eiy kafiron; Kashmir hamara chhod do (you exploiters and infidels, leave our Kashmir)* were an expression of this sentiment. A consideration of these matters carries grave implications for an understanding of Kashmir's recent history.

Had Pandita's book purported to be a contemporary history, it could be faulted for many lacunae. These would include a description of the fault lines going back to the early 1950s, the rampant electoral corruption that gave the lie to the claims of Indian democracy, and once the movement

had gained momentum, the curfews, massacres, disappearances and mass humiliation (during counter-insurgency operations) inflicted upon entire localities. To add to this, there is the fact that from the 1980s onward, the communalisation of the Indian polity had taken a sharp turn for the worse, with the rise of Khalistani terrorism, the occupation of the Golden Temple by Sikh extremists, the Blue Star operation of 1984, followed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the carnage of Delhi's Sikhs. It is arguable that the bureaucracy and security apparatus were influenced by communal bias and that this atmosphere influenced the behaviour of state organs in Kashmir as elsewhere.

This situation was compounded by the expulsion of the Pandits, who were denied even the status of internally displaced people, and in utter disregard of the forced nature of their flight, dubbed *migrants* in official discourse. Added to this was the distorted focus of civil society activists who (with honourable exceptions) tended to overlook, ignore or underplay the violation of their human rights. On the other hand, the Hindutva ideologues and their front organisations used it to ratchet up a hate campaign against Muslims, which has been their staple for many decades. This served to reinforce the atmosphere of communal animosity in the Valley. The Amarnath yatra became a political football and in June 2008, Hindutva activists hiding behind the national flag blockaded movements of essential supplies to Kashmir. The divergence of public opinion in Ladakh and other areas inhabited by non-Kashmiri speaking groups tended to be drowned out in the rising tide of communal hatred.

A history of Jammu & Kashmir would also need to cover developments along the fluid borders of India and Pakistan in the months following the partition of British India. It would include the geo-strategic calculations of the receding British Empire, the genocidal activities of communal militia aided by the armies and police of the princely states all along the emergent international border stretching from the Northern Areas, through a bleeding Punjab to Multan. For recent developments, it would need to take stock of politics in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran – indeed, Pandita does mention the connection between the rise of Islamism in these countries and the politics of Kashmir's *azaadi* movement.

However, the book is not such a history and it is pointless to expect it to imitate something that it does not claim to be. The authenticity of

an account rendered by an eyewitness to the 1984 carnage (for example) is not undermined by a failure to demonstrate detailed knowledge of Bhindranwale's activities or of the Khalistan movement. Nor may a victim of murderous mobs in Gujarat in 2002 be blamed for her disinterest in the origins of the Ayodhya dispute. Pandita's memoir is a source for future historical research, for it provides a valuable addition to what is known about the human cost of the Kashmir conflict. Thus, he vigorously counters the view that the exodus of Kashmir's Hindu population (roughly three lakhs) from the Valley was devilishly engineered by governor Jagmohan to clear the way for a security crackdown.[2] Rather, Pandita attributes the exodus to the atmosphere of terror induced by communal killings and hateful slogans that made most Pandit men and women fear for their lives and their dignity.

Pandita's story is a deeply personal recounting of one family's forced exile, and as such, it provides material for seekers of truth to engage with. It carries the sense of authentic experience, as much as do the stories of humiliated and bereaved Kashmiri Muslims; and in future no attempt at a truthful history of Kashmir can omit or gloss over the Pandit experience. One of his informants is the redoubtable Sanjay Tickoo, founder of the Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, who has remained in Srinagar through the darkest times, retaining his links with his neighbours, resolute both in his resistance to communal stereotyping as also in his determination to catalogue the names of hundreds of Pandits killed, the hundreds of temples desecrated. If Tickoo were to write his version of events that would broaden the picture even further.

It is one of the few signs of hope in our country that people dealt the most horrible blows by fate manage somehow to retain their humanity. I remember a young Sikh woman who had lost both her parents to mob violence in Bokaro in 1984. She was forced to bring up her two young siblings on her own. There was not the slightest trace of communal bitterness in her – to the contrary, she would fiercely resist such talk among fellow Sikhs when she sensed the appearance of stereotypes in their utterances. I remember too, the privilege of meeting two middle aged men from Meerut in the late 1980s. One was a Sikh, the other a Muslim. They

2 Some of us remember Jagmohan as part of Indira and Sanjay Gandhi's Emergency regime when he was associated with the bulldozing of slums at Turkman Gate in 1976. Jagmohan later joined the BJP.

were close friends, and each had lost a son to communal violence. They had decided to devote their lives to proving that love conquers hate. I am reminded too, of Jyoti Punwani's report (Mail Today, January 27, 2011) on an elderly man who lost his wife in Godhra. Even after his wife was burnt to death in the Sabarmati Express on February 27, 2002, Girishchandra Rawal refused to support the massacre of Muslims in Ahmedabad. He told this reporter: "I would like to burn the entire society. But my religion doesn't permit me to do so. There's no space for revenge in it." Gladys Staines didn't wait for Dara Singh to be sentenced before she forgave him; she did so immediately after he had caused her husband and two young sons to be burned alive. And as Pandita says at one point in his narrative, we may lose our homes, but need not lose our humanity.

This persistence of faith in our fellows is the basis for a philosophy of everyday life, life lived without the weight of messianic projects of the kind that invariably invoke martyrdom and celebrate violence in the name of a bright future that never arrives. Its presence cannot be denied. Without it and given the scale of injustice that ravages the sub-continent, there would have been complete chaos – as things are, we still live on the edge. For those who are naturally inclined towards trusting others, it can only be called a blessing. For others who have to learn restraint one way or another, or have it taught to us, the first step remains the acceptance of bitter truths. It is a feature of human nature that we prefer the simple to the complex, black and white judgments to shades of grey. It makes us comfortable to have all the good on our side, and to place the entire blame for evil on the side of our (preferred) enemies. But lies, especially the ones we tell ourselves, have the tendency to disturb our equanimity. As the philosopher Karl Jaspers said, the violation of truth poisons everything gained by the violation.

Deaths in the family

Pandita's style is simple and direct. What comes through repeatedly is a sense of a child speaking, whether the child is the author himself, his uncle, his other informants, or Vinod Dhar, the fourteen year old boy (in 1998) from the village of Wandhama in Gandarbal who witnessed the assassination of twenty-three members of his joint family in one night. The author relates how difficult it was to meet Dhar and to get him to talk.

Throughout it all, there remains the sense of bewilderment at catastrophe, of disbelief at the sheer undeserved-ness of tragedy, of innocence violated. The destruction of childhood is the worst thing adults can do to the young, especially because children do not ask to be born, nor deserve to have their minds and bodies overrun by the accumulation of past misfortunes. Among other things, this book should remind us of the thousands of young lives that have been destroyed or traumatised by the conflict in Kashmir.

In 1997, Pandita lost his cousin, Ravi, whom he describes as his brother and hero, to terrorist bullets. Ravi was a botanist in Srinagar University and a favourite with Pandita's mother. He had refused to migrate and insisted he was secure. Of Ravi's two closest friends one, Latif Lone joined the insurgents, and was shot by security forces in 1990. This was the same Latif who on a prior occasion had rescued Mrs Pandita from the scene of a shoot-out and escorted her to safety. When the news of his death came, she could only repeat through her tears that Latif was in the prime of youth. In the summer of 1997, Ravi was pulled out of a bus and shot while on the way out from Jammu. He left behind a young wife and an infant son. The pain is rendered more profound when one of Ravi's other close friends, a fellow botanist still in the university, avoided the author's repeated efforts to re-connect.

The effortless quality of Pandita's prose stems not from literary flair but the searing emotional experience that it recollects. That does not take away from his abilities of description. At one point he says of Kashmir, that it is 'an overdose of nostalgia'; at another, remembering a happy duration in Chandigarh, that 'those years passed like a Mobius strip.' But above all, he records his experiences and those of his informants in plain language, without embellishment. Truth-speaking can only lead to good results, even if it is bitter sometimes. I hope in this case that it will provoke thinking citizens to exercise their mental vision without the use of ideological prisms. Indians should resist communal hatred and stand up for the democratic rights of every one of us, regardless of their caste or religion. And those rights include the right of Pandits to call Kashmir their home in reality and not merely with nostalgia.

So here we are, burdened with our respective stories of sorrow, loss and humiliation, attempting with varying degrees of success, to stop the mountain of bitterness from collapsing upon our very souls. Who is to say which mountain bears greater weight? Why think that way at all? To tell a

story, especially one so close to the bone, can relieve the teller of a burden. It may make him feel more at home in the world.

But do all the stories of Kashmir cancel themselves out? Our speech has become indistinguishable from silence because every utterance is marked by communal identity and therefore subject to automatic consideration or dismissal. We have raised *ad hominem* argumentation to surreal status. Pandita speaks of an eccentric and learned old man he remembers from childhood, who was known to walk on a bridge mumbling to himself: *'I'm on bridge, bridge is on water, bridge-bridge cancel, I'm on water.'* We are all on water now, cursed by an unbridgeable half-ness. Our shikara has sprung countless leaks. No shore is visible, and only we can repair the leaks. Will we take time off from screaming at one another to save ourselves from drowning? I cannot say. But when we stop and listen, with attentive silence, to the stories that make us uneasy, the first step will have been taken. Listening is healing. Thank you, Rahul for making us listen.

pad pad oh hazaar kitaabaan
kadi apne aap nu padheya nahi
ja ja varde mandir maseeti
kade mann apne vich vadeyaa nahi
avein lardaa hai, shaitaan de naal bandeya
kadi nafz apne naal ladeya nahi
[Oh! You read so many books / but you never read yourself
You go into temples and mosques / but never venture into your own mind
What's the point of wrestling with Satan / When you never tried wrestling with your soul]

Our Moon has Blood Clots: The Exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits; by Rahul Pandita was published by Random House India in 2013

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AUGUST 15, 2013 — ASIAN AGE

On Independence Day, a hard look at where we stand now

"The historical people prefer the hope of the future to the blessing of presence"
– Stanley Rosen

We celebrate, once more, the advent of our nation upon the stage of world history. But the people and traditions of India were in existence for centuries prior to August 1947, so what are we celebrating? What was new was India's admission to the theatre of nation-states; its formalised entry into modernity. *Modern* is a famously slippery term, originating in Latin, indicating *made just now*, today, and referring to recent or present time. Since it is over a thousand years old, its current usage clearly refers as much to a condition of the human spirit as to a historical period. It's been *now* for a long time!

No matter how ancient the heritage claimed by nationalists for their nation, the *nation-state* is of relatively recent vintage – it dates to the Western revolutionary era of the eighteenth century. That was also when the (geometrically derived) circular meaning of revolution underwent a change, and the word began to refer to progress in a straight line. Nationalism merged with the vocabulary of the assumed rectilinear course of modernity, and the nation-state emerged as the spatial home of a fabricated abstraction called the Nation.

With its conquest by nationalism, the state began to be viewed

less as an instrument of law, and more as the instrument of the Nation. Somewhere along the way we forgot that sovereignty is a human and not a divine matter. Along with minerals and forests, human beings became a resource, and the inversion was complete. The nation-state held sovereign power, and the people whose will was supposedly the foundation of legitimate governance, were transformed into mere biomass, building material to be sculpted into glorious nationhood. Nationalism became enforced affinity, the modern form of prayer.

A partisan spirit has overtaken the polity. The standard of relevance for ideas tends nowadays to point automatically to political parties. We inhabit a world of cliché and accusation. Both forms of speech refer to the Nation – the clichés speak of its bright future, while the accusations are employed by partisan wrestlers bent upon showing themselves as more patriotic than their opponents. Presumptuous phrases such as "world class", "one billion Indians", and "the nation wants answers" bombard our minds every day. Metaphysical abstractions such as "collective conscience of the nation" are bandied about by judges. Yet more abstractions such as "Hindu nationalism" are being presented for our edification. (Haven't we had enough of this? Remember the fate of Muslim nationalism?)

Truthful speech is cast aside, intellectual bankruptcy and deceit are on parade. Those who want us to remember 1528 (when Babri Masjid was said to have been constructed) ask us to forget 2002 (the riots in Gujarat). Those who stalled justice for the victims of 1984 (the Delhi Sikh riots) tell us that Maoists are India's biggest security threat. Why shouldn't the rampaging violence against women and children be given that status? Development is surrounded by criminality; and reforms are taken to mean unrestrained assaults upon land, forests, rivers and poor people. After the Uttarakhand disaster, news editors who regularly decry environmental regulations as "green terror", began denouncing the environmental negligence of officialdom without a word of self-reflection.

The other dimension of national existence is its bondage to conflict. World military expenditure in 2012 was estimated at $1,756 billion, representing 2.5 per cent of global GDP, higher than in any year between 1945 and 2010. The world system is an enemy system and nationalism is ideologically crucial to it. It exists as a tight nexus of arms industries, nuclear weapons production, massive national arms budgets and growing surveillance empires. India, China and Pakistan are the world's top three

arms importers, with India replacing China at the top of the list in 2011. Nations cannot exist without enemies, even though this structure keeps the world perpetually on the edge of catastrophe. The language of national animus enables everyone to disclaim responsibility for conflict – it is always (credibly) someone else's fault. For India and Pakistan, the daily military calisthenics at the Wagah border manifests the orchestrated nature of national animosity.

War has become an internal affair – essential for the ruling groups of all countries. South Asia abounds in private armies, the most prominent of which portray themselves as armed patriots of their preferred identity. Maoist guerillas, *lashkars* of Allah's faithful, Hindutva cadre and commandos of various liberation forces, all warriors of sacred causes are united in their fascination with martyrdom, machismo and the long march towards the glorious future. As if international conflict were not enough, we are now conditioned by everyday propaganda to prepare for the militarisation of civil society as well. Communal tension and violence have emerged as tools of clever governance. It might be difficult to accept this, but war is not meant to be won. It is meant to be continuous.

By a recent estimate, bribes add between 35 to 40 per cent to the cost of infrastructural projects. The fate of honest officers underscores the fact that some of these payments must facilitate wrongful clearances. This implies that some officers, businessmen and leaders are consciously violating the law. Those who resist them are often depicted as enemies of national progress.

Can we please stop the nation worship, glory-talk and 'world-class' mumbo-jumbo for a few minutes and think about the people in factories, slums and villages? What is a nation less its people? India ranks 181 out of 188 countries in terms of public expenditure on health, and 142 out of 194 in life expectancy at birth. In expected years of schooling, India ranks 142 out of 192 countries. In health and education taken together (with the above indicators), India ranks 163 out of 186. Does it look as if lofty nationalist phrase-mongering will make a dent in this alarming social reality?

Thirty-eight years ago, during the Emergency, DTC buses carried slogans telling the public that we were marching towards a happy tomorrow. Tomorrow seems to be taking its time. But today is here. How we act and speak today is what will make a difference.

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SEPTEMBER 6, 2013 – THE TRIBUNE

The edge of oblivion

Violence is productive of nothing but more violence. Yet it is celebrated in popular ideologies

> "The primitive mind is, in the fullest meaning of the word, imperishable" – Sigmund Freud, 1915

> "The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence" – Martin Luther King, 1958

Do the tense thoughts of these influential men have a bearing on the contemporary world? Their lives were linked with the most cataclysmic forces of the century, Nazism and racism. In 1938 at the age of 82, Freud had to flee his native Vienna after the Nazi occupation. The preacher-activist King confronted racialist bigotry in a non-violent struggle that cost him his life but changed America. Of what relevance are their ideas on war and violence? Is terror a fringe phenomenon or has it long been part of what we call the mainstream?

We would be foolish to ignore these questions. The twentieth century witnessed 175 to 250 million deaths on account of war and genocide. The proportion of soldiers to civilians killed declined from 43 per cent in the First World War to 28 per cent or less in the second (which cost some 60 million lives). The distinction between soldiers and civilians evaporated – terror-bombings were committed by all sides in the Second World War. After 1945, people believed in a new era of peace. This was shattered by

the Korean War and developments in Palestine, Malaya, Indonesia, Kenya and Vietnam; not to mention Biafra, Iraq, Rwanda and Yugoslavia. George Orwell summed it up well – war, he said in his dystopian novel *1984*, is not meant to be won but to be continuous. The psychological damage resulting from so much killing can only be guessed.

Lest we forget

Every so often an Indian businessman uses Hitler's name to attract commercial attention and is surprised at the reaction. Wasn't Hitler a famous fellow and an ally of Netaji Subhas? He was indeed. He also criminalised the German state in its entirety. "The very first essential for success," said Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, "is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence." That some Indians see him as a statesman is a pointer to our own psychic ailments. The most colossal bloodletting in history carries no meaning for us.

However, the Hitler regime was not only the prime example of state terror. It was also the first to base itself on the doctrine of racial purity, an idea it radicalised to the point of annihilation. After the passage of racial laws in 1933, it began transferring Jews, Romani and blacks to concentration camps. During 1939-41 about 100,000 mentally sick and incurable Germans were killed by state order. Thereafter, the regime built death factories for Jews from all over Europe to be sent for extermination. Over five million were gassed to death in camps such as Maidanek, Buchenwald and Auschwitz. Firms such as IG Farben, Siemens and Bayer were involved in the genocide.

Even today the Nazi genocide of the Romani (also known as gypsies) remains largely unspoken. These nomads of Indian origin had always been subject to racial hatred, forced settlement and enslavement. Some of this continued into the modern era and even under communist regimes. Early in 1940, 250 Romani children from Czechoslovakia were murdered with the new Zyklon-B gas at Buchenwald. On December 16, 1942 Himmler ordered all Romani in Germany deported to Auschwitz for extermination. There were an estimated three million Romani in German-controlled territories at the height of the Nazi regime, of whom a third to half were murdered.

Radiant people

The other marker of the age of extermination was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Up to 150,000 Japanese civilians were burnt to death in these two cities within minutes, and tens of thousands died of radiation later. The bombing was sought to be justified in terms of lives 'saved' by avoiding an invasion of Japan. These arguments have been rebutted by many historians who point to America's strategic goal of countering Soviet interests and testing the newly developed weapon. Leaving that aside, the nuclear explosion was a horribly fitting conclusion to the most destructive war in history, a war seen as 'total' because it pitted entire populations against one another.

Have we learnt what exterminism signifies? The Pakistani physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy recently described his conversations during the 1990s with Indian and Pakistani generals. Senior officers on both sides expressed delight at acquiring atomic weapons. Their passionate evocation of honour and glory made Hoodbhoy describe their instincts as Neolithic. Perhaps this was what Freud meant by the imperishable nature of the primitive mind. They saw nuclearisation as a means to permanent peace.

Gandhi had fielded similar questions in 1946. Responding to people who believed that the bomb would end war, he said, "The atom bomb has not stopped violence. People's hearts are full of it and preparations for a third world war may even be said to be going on." He said, "the atom bomb is the last word in violence today... there used to be so-called laws of war... Now we know the naked truth. War knows no law except that of might. The atom bomb... resulted for the time being in destroying the soul of Japan. What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see." When asked whether the bomb had made nonviolence useless, he said, "No. It is the only thing the atom bomb cannot destroy. I did not move a muscle when I first heard that the atom bomb had wiped out Hiroshima. On the contrary, I said to myself, unless now the world adopts nonviolence it will spell certain suicide for mankind."

The birth of nations

The most fearsome precursor to India's independence was the Calcutta killing of August 1946. Between five to ten thousand people were killed under the ministry of the Muslim League's Hussain Suhrawardy. In October

there were massacres in Noakhali, followed by a pogrom in Bihar under a Congress ministry. India and Pakistan were born amidst genocide. About fifteen million people were forced to migrate. The communal 'cleansing' of Punjab's population was catastrophic. Up to a million people were killed in 1947. After that there were massacres of Muslims in Hyderabad (India) in 1948 and of Hindus in East Pakistan in 1949 and 1950. The cycle of violence continued for two years. Perhaps it never really ended.

Then there was the drama surrounding Gandhi's murder. His last fast in January 1948 was not about payments to Pakistan, but for the restoration of the shrine of Bakhtiyar Kaki at Mehrauli and for communal peace. Had this fast not succeeded there would have been a Babri Masjid-like situation on the outskirts of Delhi. His assassination was a sad rehearsal of the ghastly Indian tradition of founding a new edifice upon a blood sacrifice. In 1965, fresh doubts about V.D. Savarkar's involvement led to the appointment of an inquiry commission headed by Justice Jivanlal Kapur. His report (1969) noted the negligence of the police and concluded that the facts undermined "any theory other than the conspiracy to murder by Savarkar and his group." However, in 2003 the Indian government installed his portrait in the Lok Sabha. Evidently our MPs still revere Gandhi's assassins.

Has India transcended the violence of 1947, or has it entered our DNA? The Constitution guarantees the lives and liberty of citizens. But thousands have died in riots since then, and the failure to punish the perpetrators has eroded this guarantee. These incidents are identifiable as genocide under the UN convention of December 1948. We face a relentless assault on democratic values and institutions. Sections of the ruling class habitually deploy violence to pursue their ends. Communal tension is brazenly instigated to gain power. The violence unleashed during elections or land-grabbing operations is colossal in scale. India abounds in private armies, some of which portray themselves as ultra-nationalists. Everyday propaganda prepares us for the militarisation of civil society.

The doctrine of collective guilt has become common sense for many people. Entire communities are held responsible for crimes committed by a few. Wounded sentiment has become the most popular mask worn by hooligans. Democracy is being bypassed via a parallel system of representation based on community. The repeated instigation of retributive violence or the threat of it has become endemic. Along with other factors,

this accelerates the criminalisation of India's polity. Concepts such as democracy, secularism and the rule of law are in danger of losing their meaning.

The choice before us

Gandhi referred to the use of the atom bomb for "the wholesale destruction of men, women and children as the most diabolical use of science." He said, "There are two kinds of shastras in the world, one satvik and the other rajasik, one conforming to dharma and the other not conforming to dharma. The shastra of the atom bomb does not conform to dharma... It usurps the place of God." Those who demur at his language may remind themselves of Robert Oppenheimer's remark that physicists had come to know sin. Physics and metaphysics are not that far apart. The use of science for destructive purposes has pushed humanity to the brink. The contempt for life is the hallmark of modern nihilism.

In one of the first reflections upon Nazism's death factories, Hannah Arendt wrote: "In their effort to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered... crimes which man can neither punish nor forgive." About concentration camps, she noted the irrevocable rupture that the discovery of these "holes of oblivion" had wrought in history: "Modern politics revolves around a question which, strictly speaking, should never enter into politics, the question of all or nothing: of all, that is a human society rich with infinite possibilities; or exactly nothing, that is, the end of mankind." When philosopher Karl Jaspers rejected the idea of casting Hitlerism in the light of some satanic greatness, she agreed with him, but insisted that what had happened in the camps was not a case of humans killing other humans for human reasons, howsoever horrible. What had occurred said Arendt, was "*the organized attempt to eradicate the concept of the human being.*" This is the closest we will ever come towards understanding modern exterminism. The phenomenon was not restricted to theatres of war – the whole world was enveloped in it, and we live in its shadow.

The idea that only violence may inaugurate new beginnings, that a just order may only be validated by blood is our deadliest illusion. Yet this idea is celebrated in our favourite ideologies. Violence is productive of nothing but more violence. Freud was insightful in his observation about the

stability of our primeval instincts. But we had better control them. Because, as Gandhi and King warned us, the choice today is the one between violence and annihilation.

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JANUARY 30, 2014 – ASIAN AGE

The music of humanity

Gandhi's memory remains real because he signified the persistence of friendship and love amidst the hatred and violence that still plagues us

> *"The force of love is the same as the force of the soul or truth. We have evidence of its working at every step"*
> – M K Gandhi

One of the most famous anti-fascist films was Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, which subjected Hitler's fantasies of global domination to withering satire. Less well-known was his first post-war movie, *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), about a genial family man who makes a living by marrying and murdering wealthy widows. Upon being caught, this anti-hero says, "Clausewitz (Prussian general and military theorist) said that war is the logical extension of diplomacy; Monsieur Verdoux feels that murder is the logical extension of business."

All distinctions notwithstanding, this is where the common trajectories of modern history show themselves. A large segment of our official elites, businessmen, opinion-makers and middle classes are accustomed to the view that some amount of bloodletting is inevitable in politics, a few thousand corpses and sundry riots and 'encounters' are an acceptable cost in return for the fantasy of progress, prosperity and stability. Market fundamentalists decided long ago that untrammeled capitalism is good for humanity. That it is a fantasy does not matter – fantasies are meant to deflect our minds from intolerable reality. State power is now infused

in criminality; with a brazenly partisan media playing drummer-boy, its fascination with petty crime in contrast to its silence on crime in high places. To cite Verdoux again, "It's all business. One murder makes a villain. Millions, a hero. Numbers sanctify." Let's wait and see where our demented arithmetical imagination takes us.

Many people believe that Gandhi needs a rest. He is irrelevant, except as an icon. Is this true? I do not think so. Ahimsa remains crucial, especially when a growing sense of injustice calls for democratic agitation on a continental scale. It also relates to the ecological impact of militarism. His assassin's accusation that Gandhi was emasculating Hinduism and rendering it impotent points us beyond stereotypes on gender and masculinity. As opposed to rampant consumerism, Gandhi's frugal ideals remind us that fostering ceaseless growth with finite resources is like celebrating cancer. His condemnation of the atom bomb and of the urge to use science for destructive purposes resonates with contemporary concerns. His insistence on *shramdaan (voluntary service)* and constructive work are a compass for activist energy. His talisman for public policy – the suggestion that we keep the humblest of individuals in mind – is both ethical and pragmatic. The warning delivered during his last months: that failure to resolve the Hindu-Muslim conflict would result in the sub-continent being doomed to condominium status under the great powers was prophetic. So was his critique of communally defined nationalism, implicit in his opposition to the transfer of population in 1947. His critical engagement with modernity was surely a necessary debate.

Gandhi's mind worked in tandem with his heart and instinct. He had warned that partitioning India would not solve communal problems and that it would lead to catastrophic violence. He also warned that if the decision was taken and the two parties did not act with goodwill and trust, it would lead to a state of permanent animosity and conflict. In the last months of his life he understood his isolation from the Congress as well as from a large part of public sentiment. He said he felt as if he had been thrown into a fire pit, that his heart burned. About those who combined communal hatred with slogans of *Akhand (undivided)* Hindustan, he remarked: "There is nothing in common between me and those who want me to oppose Pakistan except that we are both opposed to the division of the country. There is a fundamental difference between their opposition and mine. How can love and enmity go together?"

Gandhi derived his lessons from unremarkable things. Rather, he could see extraordinary truths in small events. He was a philosopher of the quotidian. Asked by his imaginary interlocutor (in *Hind Swaraj*) for historical evidence on soul-force or truth-force, Gandhi replies that the continued existence of human life despite incessant wars was proof enough. It was war and violence that made news, not the everyday love and co-operation that characterised the lives of millions. History did not record everything that happened but rather, "every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul... you cannot expect silver ore in a tin mine."

But he found his silver where he expected it. In 1947, two refugee women came to see him in Delhi. The first, a Hindu, had lost her son and daughter-in-law and was left with her grandchildren. The second was a Muslim who had no family. They were devoted to each other and wanted Gandhi's blessings for their plan to bring up the little ones as joint grandchildren. The Mahatma was deeply moved and saw them as an embodiment of his passion for Hindu-Muslim unity. And he gave an orange to each of the children.

The one stable feature of communal ideology is pessimism. To insist that people of different faiths, despite being neighbours for centuries are incapable of co-existence, is surely the most pessimistic belief there is. A year ago, Pakistani writer Mobarak Haider wrote of Pakistan's polity: "War is a tragedy but a society at war with itself and everything around, with no objective and no remorse is more than a tragedy; it is a total disaster." He went on to characterise it as being "in a state of schizophrenia passing into paranoia." Whether this assessment fits all of us is a matter for self-reflection.

In October 1947, All-India Radio arranged a special broadcast on Gandhi's birthday, and requested him to listen. He declined, saying he preferred *rentio* (the spinning wheel) to radio. The hum of the spinning-wheel was sweeter. He heard in it the "still sad music of humanity". He refused to release his birthday messages from the world over – it felt futile, when the public seemed to have lost faith in nonviolence and truth. As we live through January 30 once more, as we replay the mindless rituals, let us think why, far from becoming irrelevant, Gandhi remains so real. It is because he drew meaning from ordinary things, especially those that signified the persistence of friendship and love amidst hatred and violence.

That is why his life and message are so much a part of the "still sad music of humanity". Today we can only hope that the sadness disperses, and the music remains.

Goodbye once again Bapu. Let's hope we learn to deserve you.

The Broken Middle

India's secular values can only be restored by moderate speech and non-violence

> *"If justice perishes, human life on earth has lost its meaning"*
> – Immanuel Kant

> *"Once crime was as solitary as a cry of protest; now it is as universal as science. Yesterday it was put on trial; today it determines the law"*
> – Albert Camus

1984 remains India's Orwellian year par excellence. Why? Because it is the defining moment at which the language of public life became loaded with the requirement of deceit. The gap between official and political utterances and the evidence of our eyes and ears became an unbridgeable chasm; and even the thin pretension that state institutions and the Government of India existed to uphold the law of the land and the security of citizens was dropped into a furnace and evaporated into thin air. There is nothing more terrifying than the sensation that truth itself has ceased to exist, that silence is all that is left to us because no one is listening, or none may be trusted. That was what I and many of my friends and fellow citizens felt in those three days in late 1984 – and indeed in the months and years that followed.

The violent events that swept through New Delhi and other urban centres in 1984 were a state-enabled, politically sponsored, communally

inspired carnage of Sikh citizens because they belonged to the same community as the assassins of the Prime Minister. State power rested with the Congress party. Most of the killers were ordinary people who, egged on by senior Delhi Congressmen and their local henchmen, believed in the primitive idea of collective guilt (i.e., that all members of a community carry responsibility for the crimes committed by some amongst them). It is very likely that they also believed they would neither be stopped, nor face trial for their deeds. Indeed, many rioters believed that they were engaged in patriotic activity, that mass murder was something that their political leaders and patrons actively desired. Moreover, many people with no political connections spoke in terms of Sikhs needing to be taught a lesson, etc.

In effect, we were in an atmosphere of genocidal consensus. I do not mean that everyone had become a potential murderer, but that a large section of the population that did not directly attack Sikhs nevertheless condoned such attacks or remained indifferent to the take-over of the streets by hooligans. Communal violence has been a constant feature of Indian politics since the 1920s, but a state-enabled communal massacre in independent India's capital, under the aegis of the emblematic party of Indian nationalism was unprecedented. Precisely because of this, 1984 is the year of the broken middle. Mob-violence on a mass scale entered mainstream political culture. No longer could it be claimed that the politics of revenge emanated from the margins of the polity. It was the middle ground that was now shattered, giving fresh impetus to communal concepts of nationalism. 1984 set a new standard for the normalisation of brutality and lawlessness in the Indian polity. It undermined faith in the Constitution and gave strength to criminal elements in political parties and society at large. It strengthened communal bias within the bureaucracy and police and generated widespread cynicism.

Having allowed the violence to rage for several days, the commanders of state institutions decided to stop the bloodletting. After that, a tidal wave of frightening words swept through society. Contemporary speech could broadly be divided into two kinds – blatant justification, as in 'they deserved it' (which had the merit of frankness); and varieties of escapism and/or self-exoneration, as in 'Sikhs distributed sweets after the assassination', 'in any family sometimes the elder brother has to slap the younger brother', 'Congress workers are responsible, not us', 'after all, they

killed the Prime Minister, it was an outpouring of patriotic grief', 'when a great tree is uprooted, the ground is bound to shake', etc. 1984 prompted our opinion-makers and ideologues to indulge in a gigantic cover-up operation, that was simultaneously an exercise in self-delusion. Partisan buck-passing was raised to the level of an art form. Who hasn't heard it said that the RSS/BJP cannot be condemned for the Gujarat carnage of 2002, because after all, the Congress also engineered carnage in 1984? This argument acts like an opiate for some of us. Everybody is guilty, ergo nobody is. One massacre deserves another.

1984 saw official bias at work precisely when the neutral authority of the state was most needed. Violent mobs were shouting communal slogans, desecrating gurudwaras and burning Sikh passers-by in the streets to assert communal superiority. And many residents of Delhi were enjoying the spectacle. Yet in the midst of all this what we got was a passive Home Minister (Narasimha Rao), delayed summoning of sufficient armed force, biased utterances and abetment of crimes by policemen on duty, non-registration of FIRs, doctoring of evidence, deceitful behaviour of public prosecutors, irresponsible behaviour by mass media sometimes amounting to instigation of violence, blatant judicial white-wash, punishment transfers of responsible functionaries, and collusion amongst bureaucrats, police and political executives to the point of granting one another impunity for criminal negligence or worse.[1] Instances of gang-rape are still being covered up. Most of these features were visible in Gujarat in 2002, including the shameless speed with which political gain (calling elections in a communally charged environment) was extracted from the revengeful climate. Advertisements issued by the Congress Party during the 1984 Lok Sabha elections appealed to such sentiments by representing India's border shrinking inwards. These factors point towards criminal complicity at the highest level of state institutions. Such complicity cannot work unless large numbers of responsible officials are biased, and moreover, unless they believe that the public at large is cynical or equally complicit.

In January 1985 newly elected Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi entered a joint session of Parliament accompanied by President Zail Singh and H K L. Bhagat, a man whose constituency was the venue of some of the worst violence.[2] A resolution was adopted condoling Indira Gandhi's death.

1 These aspects are described in detail in the three texts referenced in footnote 8.

2 Darshan Kaur identifies Bhagat in courtroom: Times of India, 16 Nov 1996

Rajiv made a mild statement of sympathy, but no one saw fit to condole the deaths of thousands of Indians cruelly murdered for no fault of theirs. Twenty one years later, on August 11, 2005, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared in the Rajya Sabha that 1984 was "a great national shame, a great national tragedy", and that he had "no hesitation in apologising not only to the Sikh community but the whole Indian nation." He denied that the Congress leadership was complicit in the violence, whilst admitting that certain leaders had been implicated by the Nanawati Commission. Jagdish Tytler was obliged to leave Singh's ministry, and Sajjan Kumar his local government post.

The most enigmatic question that 1984 confronts us with is why and how the larger world, can without warning, drag innocent people into a hell of agony and despair. At such moments, not just state institutions, but the very universe reeks of injustice. In such situations even a simple acknowledgement of our suffering can help ease the pain. But our tallest political leaders were incapable of this – in fact, their utterances and behaviour rubbed salt into the wounds of the bereaved. Whatever this says about Indian policing, it says more about the incoherence of India's conscience, even though some judges use phrases like 'collective conscience of the society'.[3] Who are we, after all? What does it mean to be a nation? 1984 threw these questions in our faces yet once more. Other than the assumption that might is right, no answer is yet forthcoming.

Wool over our eyes

What is meant by the phrase 'requirement of deceit'? It's quite simple.

It is misleading to say that the actions of the Government of India are always grounded in law when the police cannot be trusted to cognise terrible crimes transpiring in front of their eyes. To pretend otherwise is deceitful.

It is misleading to say that India's criminal justice system can be trusted to uphold the constitution if the utterances of even a single judge carry the odour of communal bias. To pretend otherwise is deceitful.

It is false to say that public prosecution is being conducted in the

3 From the Supreme Court judgement awarding the death sentence to Afzal Guru. Dated August 4, 2005

interest of justice and public order when the Public Prosecutors seek to protect wrong doers. To pretend otherwise is deceitful.

It is misleading to claim that political parties represent the interests of all Indians, when in fact we can see them working for sectional interests and/or promoting communal divisiveness. To pretend otherwise is deceitful.

It is false to claim that J S Bhindranwale was merely a religious preacher who was persecuted by the Indian state on account of his campaign to cleanse Sikhism and fight for justice. Such claims seek to wipe away the memory of his involvement in violent crime, contempt for moderation, instigation of hatred, desecration of the Golden Temple and pretension to speak for the entire Sikh community. To pretend otherwise is deceitful.

It is misleading to frame the question of responsibility in purely partisan language, such as 'Congress killed Sikhs'. Senior Congressmen were the prime movers of the carnage, but it is not enough to say this. Such a frame glosses over the intense and palpable communal hatred intrinsic to the violence of 1984. It disguises the fact that the killers saw themselves as patriots teaching a lesson to 'anti-national Sikhs'. It overlooks the surcharged communal atmosphere in north India in the early 1980s, an atmosphere that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi cynically manipulated from time to time. It does not explain why many people with no sympathy for the Congress applauded the violence as just retribution meted out to an entire community. It cannot explain why Sajjan Kumar, still under trail for his acts in 1984, received the maximum number of votes in India in the 2004 elections.[4] In 1984 the Congress transformed itself into a vehicle for communal ideology and violence. But ideology has origins over and beyond organisations. The ideological feature is as important to remember as the organisational one. To pretend otherwise is deceitful.

The partisan approach also diverts our attention from the acceptability of controlled mobs, private armies, vigilante groups and political assassination. Private armies have thrived in India since before 1947. In November 1947 the AICC (which included Patel and Nehru) passed a resolution naming "the Muslim National Guards, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Akali Volunteers and such other

4 Manoj Mitta and H.S. Phoolka; *When a Tree Shook Delhi*; 2007, p 73. Sajjan Kumar won with over eight and a half lakh votes.

organisations" as "an endeavour to bring into being private armies"; calling them "a menace to the hard-won freedom of the country".[5] However, the Indian polity has been unable to control vigilantism, which operates across a broad political spectrum.[6] Indeed, the seamless links between private armies and so-called 'mainstream' parties indicate that the ruling elites do not wish to, or cannot do away with them. Sometimes these formations acquire an autonomous or semi-autonomous existence. An examination of the political, human and financial resources of the insurgent groups of the North East; the Khalistani armed factions of the 1980s; Islamist lashkars and mujahideen; and numerous caste-based vigilante groups can reveal these links. The Shiv Sena named itself an army and repeatedly engaged in hooliganism against ethnic minorities in Mumbai. Its leader hailed the terrorist expertise of the Tamil Tigers, aside from his numerous speech-acts of violent incitement.[7] Yet it remains a pillar of the establishment in Maharashtra.

Privatised violence is the elephant in India's drawing room. It is the clue to the phenomenon of mainstream extremism. Indian governments tend to depict 'left-wing extremism' as India's biggest security threat; whilst simultaneously sheltering armed formations such as the Salwa Judum and Ranvir Sena, and permitting RSS-affiliated paramilitaries and fronts such as the VHP and Bajrang Dal; along with fanatical Islamist ulama to freely indulge in hate speech and hooliganism. The Maoist armed groups are just one among many private armies, and they too have links with vested interests. To pretend that networks of vigilantes can operate for decades without some level of support from bourgeois civil society is to deceive ourselves.

Thus the phrase 'requirement of deceit' implies that large sections of society, across all communities and beyond the elites, need a diet of lies to sustain themselves; to disguise their complicity in mass crime; to convince themselves of their own virtue, or to enable daily life to transpire as if nothing dire had ever happened. This requirement also arises from the widespread human tendency to highlight things that buttress our

5 *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, (henceforth CWMG) Vol. 90, p 541, Gandhi Heritage Portal.

6 The author's argument about the political implications of India's private armies may be read in this volume, under the title A Hard Rain Falling: Economic and Political Weekly; Issue No. 26-27

7 'Rope in LTTE to stop ISI threat: Thackeray', Times of India, August 27, 2003

arguments and forget the things that make us uneasy. We wish good and evil to be clearly demarcated, but unfortunately, they often come in mixtures. This is another reason for the generation of necessary illusion.

Recollections

Recollections of 1984 are a means of preserving the lived experience of those events. Two important documents are the citizens report entitled *Who are the Guilty?*; and *Delhi Riots*, a collection of first-person accounts. Mitta and Phoolka's book on the carnage appeared in 2007. Pritam Singh's work on human rights includes a history of events prior to June 1984.[8] All these deserve a close reading.

I will place here some of my own memories. In childhood I had heard of communal killings from my father, an Army officer posted in Fort William during the Calcutta Killing of 1946. I had never imagined I would witness anything similar. In 1984 I was a lecturer in Ramjas College in Delhi University. On November 1, I joined a peace demonstration in Lajpat Nagar. We were confronted by trishul-carrying mobs on the rampage. We met Sikh taxi drivers weeping in fear and humiliation, gurudwaras on fire. Columns of smoke rose from various parts of the city, which resembled a war zone. To my dismay, I heard about students participating in the violence; and some teachers speak approvingly of it. (I must add that some students sheltered Sikhs in their hostels). Very soon, decent-minded citizens put together a huge relief effort, named the Nagrik Ekta Manch, to deliver material/medical aid and look for trapped people. I joined a rescue operation in the Trilokpuri area, to the address of a young widow. The lane was in a lower middle-class locality. The one Sikh house there was identifiable by its charred appearance. The front door was gone, and the molten blades of the ceiling fan in the main room hung downwards. My colleague Nitya and I, accompanied by a constable climbed up the stairs to the *barsati*. It took a while for the door to be opened. Inside were a young woman, her mother and two small children. When the infant girl in her mother's arms saw the policeman's *lathi* she burst into tears, whimpering, *meri mummy ko mat maaro (don't hit my mother)*. She had seen her

8 Gobinda Mukhoty & Rajni Kothari, *Who are the Guilty?*; 1984; Uma Chakravarti & Nandita Haksar; *Delhi Riots: Three days in the life of a Nation*, 1987; Manoj Mitta & H.S. Phoolka, *When a Tree Shook Delhi*; 2007; Pritam Singh, Economy, culture and human rights; 2010.

grandfather and father being beaten and burnt to death. To this day I remain shaken and deeply moved by the plight of these people, reduced to refugee status in their own city. Where are those children today? What sense will they ever make of what happened?

On November 24, 1984, some university teachers organised a demonstration against the carnage. It was the only one of its kind in Delhi. Needless to say the much touted 'mainstream' was absent. Nor was there any protest by the RSS family, for all their talk of Sikhs being Keshdhari Hindus and the ping-pong they play with the Congress on 1984 vs 2002. We *jhola-wallahs* were the only ones to protest the massacre out on the streets. About 5000 people from all walks of life – teachers, students, auto-drivers, artisans from Jama Masjid area – walked from Red Fort to Boat Club. Passers-by on the road joined in. There were no *bhai-bhai* slogans, just the demand for justice. At places some Congress-led counter demonstrators stood by the roadside screaming at us for being *desh-drohi*. I was stunned to see the hatred in their eyes. In their minds, it was patriotic to indulge in mass murder, and anti-national to ask for justice. The same perverse concept of nationalism is active today. Barring one ultra-left group, the communist parties were absent, although members of their student affiliates enthusiastically participated. Our demonstration was blacked out by the media. Only the *Indian Express* carried three lines on an inside page. (November 25, 1984). Two weeks later a commentator wrote an opinion piece in *The Statesman* on the danger of extremism. According to him 5000 armed Sikhs had marched down Daryaganj calling for bloody revenge! Thus, do journalists spread dangerous lies. Many ordinary people appreciated our march, which remains the most significant demonstration I have ever attended.

Also, in November 1984, students of Hindu College invited comrade Sumanta Banerjee and me to address them on the events. The college seminar room was too small for the crowd, and the auditorium had to be opened. We later learned that some teachers had strongly resisted the use of the auditorium – which was packed. The mood was grim and the audience was clearly opposed to communal politics, even though there was much confusion about the issue. Among other things I said that communal violence could not be resisted by more violence, but only by a mass democratic movement for socialist goals cutting across community identities. I remember one Sikh student approaching me afterwards with

tears in his eyes, saying he wanted justice more than anything else. There was little I could say to comfort him.

The Sampradayikta Virodhi Andolan (SVA), a self-funded citizens group, was founded in November 1984 by some of the activists working in the relief camps. We wanted to engage in systematic activity to pre-empt communal violence, rather than merely react to its consequences. It fought against communal politics and demonstrated repeatedly to demand the prosecution of the guilty of 1984. Over the years we learned of shadowy 'Shakti Dals' emerging in the east Delhi colonies, which served the interests of political leaders implicated in the violence; efforts by the police to avoid the registration of FIRs, intimidation of witnesses and hypocritical behaviour by public prosecutors. All this was in the context of the Ranganath Misra Commission of Inquiry, whose findings we believed to be a whitewash. The SVA also hosted discussions about communalism. In January 1989 it adopted a constitution and rules of membership. Two stalwart communists, Satyapal Dang and Gursharan Singh attended the foundation conference. That year three members (Purushottam Agrawal, the late Jugnu Ramaswamy and I) travelled to Punjab as part of our campaign. The SVA was a direct offshoot of the violence of 1984 and lasted till 1993.

On February 6, 1985, I attended the High Court hearing of the PUDR's appeal for an order directing the police to file FIRs. Handed a copy of *Who are the Guilty?,* the judge threw it aside contemptuously and denounced teachers, journalists and civil liberties organisations. When PUDR president Gobinda Mukhoty reminded him that grave crimes had taken place, and asked for an order asking the Delhi Police to register cases, the judge said. "there was a background to it". His words appeared to justify the murder of innocents as a form of collective retribution. There is a background to all crime, but only a fair investigation can establish whether it is relevant to the judicial process. It is not the business of a judge to make prejudicial observations, especially when the initiation of due legal process is all that is being asked for. Communal hatred was evident in his utterances. Yet he was subsequently elevated to the Supreme Court.[9]

Until 1984, official representations of Bhagat Singh were in popular iconic form: clean shaven with moustache, hat and revolver. Then Blue

9 I have found two articles that mention this hearing, neither of them bring up the communally loaded statement of the judge. But I heard it and am sure others did as well.

Star and the massacre took place. On March 23, 1985, the usual government advertisements appeared reminding us of the great man. But this time they depicted Bhagat Singh wearing a turban and beard, along with Sukhdev and Rajguru wearing Nehru caps. This was when Delhi police were refusing to register FIRs. In the aftermath of mass murder, our government was busy subverting the Constitution, but it also thought fit to remind us that Bhagat Singh was a Sikh.

Early in 1986 the SVA decided to lobby members of the National Integration Council on the question of communalism and the need for justice. We drafted an Appeal which later appeared in *Mainstream*.[10] Some of us were deputed to meet political leaders. I was asked to meet a senior national leader of the BJP, to whom I was introduced by a colleague. The leader was very cordial, and he and his wife had tea with me. I gave him our appeal and sought to draw him out on the hateful nature of communal propaganda and the sheer irrationalism of campaigns around Lord Buddha's teeth, Guru Gobind Singh's horses and Lord Ram's birth-spot. At one point this leader looked at me and said, "Indians cannot be mobilised on economic issues". This was an astounding statement, both for its implicit avowal of utility as a factor in the choice of political rhetoric, as well as the naivete with which he said it. Perhaps he did not realise that his words conveyed a sense of the end justifying the means. The end was quite simply, power at any cost.

Among the other frank statements he made was the revelation that his own party colleagues in Delhi were telling him 'not to inflate' figures of Sikhs killed in the carnage. This was the most candid admission I have ever heard of communal bias against Sikhs within the BJP. (I have already argued that communal feelings cut across political affiliation. This was evident in the campus. When our staff association president proposed we donation a day's salary for relief, the 'parivar' faction refused, on the ground they had made donations in their localities).Anyway, I appreciated this person's frankness, but was struck by the combination of cordiality and ruthlessness. For the record, RSS/BJP cadres were implicated in cases of arson, rioting, murder and dacoity by the Jain-Aggarwal Committee.[11]

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10 See SVA's *Appeal to the National Integration Council*, Mainstream April 26, 1986. http://www.sacw.net/article8493.html

11 The Pioneer, April 11, 1994 and Hindustan Times, February 2, 2002. http://www.sacw.net/article8089.html

Impact on politics and society

Communal violence in India has a long history. In his 1946 book on Pakistan and India's partition, Ambedkar used the term 'civil war' to refer to communal relations in India between 1920 and 1940. Communal ideologies are based on the assumption that shared religious beliefs produce shared political interests. In essence, they embody an authoritarian impulse for the compulsory unification of ideas. Opposed to this is the view that shared religious affiliation need not produce a shared vision or sectarian inclinations. Gandhi, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Baba Kharak Singh and Maulana Azad were all deeply religious. Their politics were based on composite nationhood, *muttahida kaumiyat*. They were also adherents of non-violence. Communalists, on the other hand would rather see a Hindu party, Muslim party, Sikh party and so on. Religion here becomes a badge of identity, rather than a source of wisdom and moral guidance. Politicised religion tends to see people in terms of those who are 'chosen' and those who are superfluous. The politics of inclusion and exclusion leads directly to ethnic cleansing and ghettofication. Psychologically, it is associated with revenge and male honour. As pseudo-religion, it is obsessed with purification. Above all, fear and trauma nourish communal ideas. The partition riots, in which up to five lakh people of all communities died and fourteen million forced to migrate, exemplify the genocidal implications of Indian communalism.[12]

One aspect of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord of 1985 (the references to the scope of the Ranganath Misra commission) showed that communal assumptions had become entrenched in Indian politics. Why did either party presume that the Akali Dal was entitled to address the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi and other cities? Legally speaking the religious affiliation of the victims was irrelevant. Indian citizens had been murdered, and the police was bound to identify and punish the guilty. As they were not doing their duty, the investigation of the allegation of conspiracy was a red herring. Meanwhile, the Misra commission exonerated Congress leaders and passed the buck to the police. A series of inquiries were instituted from the late 1980s onwards, up until 2000. When substantial

12 These figures are estimates. See my article The law of killing: a brief history of Indian fascism: https://dsimian.com/2022/09/30/the-law-of-killing-a-brief-history-of-indian-fascism-arthur-rosenberg-fascism-as-a-mass-movement-kannan-srinivasan-a-subaltern-fascism/

recommendations were made, they led either to prolonged foot-dragging by the government, or outright defiance. It took years of pressure for the course of justice to begin and very few convictions have been secured. The process of stalling justice in cases of mass crimes received a major impetus. All this strengthened official impunity and led to a spiral of violence which continues.

Ordinary people are often filled with prejudices. They are quite capable of doing horrible things. In times of grave crises, political leaders have an obligation to speak wisely, to pursue justice in a transparent manner and preserve human dignity. They ought not to reinforce popular prejudice but should speak reasonably to calm passions. However, in the years immediately before and (long) after 1984, India's political leaders refused to practice restraint, often preferring to play with fire. In the late 1980s the 'parivar' launched its campaign to seize and destroy Babri Masjid. This too led to thousands of deaths, in 1990 and 1992. It is no secret that the 2002 violence was related to this campaign. (I find it remarkable that those who ask us to forget 2002 keep telling us never to forget 1528). In sum, the events of 1984 acted as force-multiplier to the all-round criminalisation of Indian society.

A study of ideological factors helps avoid the errors of partisan reductionism. The back and forth between Congress and the BJP leads us away from a simple question: is criticism of the Congress identical with a rejection of moderation? Is it the Congress that is being targeted or the very idea of composite nationalism? There is a difference between a party that lays claim to an idea, and the idea itself. Is religion-based nationalism a recipe for a stable society? Do opponents of the Congress need to join hands with communalists (of any variety)? Should secular demands such as federalism and respect for human rights be tied up with communal antagonism? Regardless of our estimate of Mahatma Gandhi, it is undeniable that he opposed communal violence and resisted the transfer of population till his dying day. Communal politics may appear to be an opposition to the Congress, but 1984 was evidence of communal bias within the Congress. Communalism is not an opposition to a party – though many portray it as such.[13] Rather, communal politics embody

13 A perceptive Hindutva ideologue reportedly remarked that organisationally speaking, the Congress had won the 1984 elections, but it was an ideological victory for the BJP. Pritam Singh, op.cit.; p 130

the rejection of the very ideal of inclusive, composite nationhood. Those of us who refuse to see this distinction (between ideals and parties) are being taken for a ride whose destination we chose not to see. One fact told a big story – the number of BJP MPs elected to the 1985 Lok Sabha was precisely two, because Hindutva voters had switched to the Congress. That is why communalism cannot be reduced to partisan affiliations, even if some parties propagate communalism whilst others make pragmatic adjustments to it.

Rather than conflate the symptom with the root phenomenon, we must try and see what is generic. The use of 1984 as a counter to 2002 is a means of dismissing the crucial issue of accountability and the decay of criminal justice in both cases. (In Gujarat, on the few occasions when justice has been done, it entailed Supreme Court interventions and the shifting of trials outside the state). It also symbolises our indifference to violence. Many Indians do not believe that involvement in mass crimes should disqualify anyone from holding executive power. They distinguish 'development' from justice, forgetting that 'development' without secular norms and lawful governance will lead to tyranny. That is why our capitalists are fond of the 'Chinese model'.

Meditations

Some secularists think religion will fade away with the advance of science. This is a pipedream, not only because science and mathematics are ethically neutral, but because it is the nature of humans to ask unanswerable questions. Religion is the sphere of absolute truth. As such it lends itself to authoritarianism. But it is also the sphere of mindfulness – an indication of the thoughtful character of the human being. We yearn for a resolution to the enigmas and contradictions of life, simplified answers that can concentrate our experience into a single feeling. In our time, this feature of religion has been appropriated by authoritarian politics for the needs of the nation state. The subject is vast and complicated but needs to be addressed.

After 1984, I began to study communal politics seriously. In 1985 I wrote a research piece that was published in the following year. One of the issues I addressed was the decay of religious traditions:

> *...it is time to stop defining Indian secularism as if it meant an arithmetical total of communally defined entities. If Bhindranwale has superceded Guru Nanak, if Pakistan is the model for a truly Islamic society, and if the activities of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Shiv Sena and RSS amount to a Hindu renaissance... then we had better recognize that the putrefaction of religious traditions is just as much a part of an all-round social crisis as, say, the debt bomb or the arms race. Deprived of the refreshing oxygen of a genuine cultural and social revolution, Indian nationalism is now choking on its own poison. Since the moral fabric is so completely fragmented as to render even the quality of innocence into communally divided categories, the very first precept of any new secularism must be the inculcation of a basic respect for human life.*[14]

All that I would change here is to extend the scenario to South Asia as a whole. For example, certain Buddhist monks and their organisations in Burma and Sri Lanka have been engaged in instigating violence. A notorious Burmese monk named Wirathu has spent nine years in prison for incitement and has (reportedly) taken the title of the Burmese bin Laden. Those interested may research the violence in Meiktila in 2013 when tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims were driven from their homes and nearly 200 killed. Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi did not condemn the violence, but there are those like the monk Sein Ni Ta, who launched cross-faith relief efforts, condemned the religious leaders who participated in the riots and denounced the 'systematic massacre' in Meiktila. [15]

In Sri Lanka, the extremist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) or Buddhist Brigade, is supported by Sri Lanka's defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the president's brother. (The government was also implicated in the assassination of the journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge.[16]) This June, Wataraka Vijitha Thero, a monk who defends religious minorities and is critical of the BBS was beaten unconscious.[17] In January, Bangladesh's political leadership was unable to prevent vicious attacks on Hindus

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14 *From Communalism in Modern India: A Theoretical Examination* (1986): https://dsimian.com/2023/09/24/communalism-in-modern-india-a-theoretical-examination-1986/

15 See *Anti-Muslim riots haunt shattered Myanmar city, The Nanyang Post*, July 7 2013.

16 'When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me': Lasantha Wickrematunge, (d 2009) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7827262.stm

17 See *Sri Lanka moderate monk critical of anti-Muslim violence beaten*; BBC report, June 19, 2014.

and Buddhists by Islamist fanatics after national elections. The savagery reminded people of the massacres unleashed by the Pakistani Army in 1971. The links between the Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami, whose cadres spearheaded the violence, is no secret.[18]

As for Pakistan, let us remember human rights activist Rashid Rehman, shot dead this May for defending blasphemy accused Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer who continues to languish in jail. In 2011, Punjab governor Salman Taseer was murdered by his bodyguard for advocating a change in the blasphemy law and sympathising with Asia Bibi, a poor Dalit Christian woman and mother jailed in 2010 on a charge of insulting the Prophet. Asia has been denied a trial for the past four years because no judge is willing to hear the case. She has apparently been deemed guilty before being heard. In brief, the justice system in this Islamic nuclear power is incapable of delivering due process to a destitute person.

Islamic extremism is racing towards self-destruction. The memory of Pakistan's only Nobel prize-winner, Abdus Salaam has been wiped out – even his gravestone has been desecrated because he was an Ahmediya. Bangladesh's Nobel prize-winner Muhammad Yunus has been denounced by an officially sponsored campaign as being un-Islamic, for defending the rights of gay people in Uganda. In India, fanatics routinely call for Taslima Nasreen to be beheaded, Muslim youth to be mobilised for holy war, and Bangladeshi war criminals to be defended.[19]

I would like to believe that most Indian Muslims prefer to lead a peaceful life than remain in a state of outrage about Rushdie and Taslima. Yet many political leaders believe that secularism implies concessions to small-minded Muslim conservatives, in the mistaken belief that the entire community is owned by a handful of aggressive ulama. The practice of conceding an imaginary 'right not to be offended' to all self-appointed defenders of the faith including RSS-sponsored educationists, has opened a Pandora's box of hurt sentiment. If Islam is endangered by Asia Bibi, Mohammad Yunis and Abdus Salam, by Taslima Nasreen, Rashid Rehman and Junaid Hafeez, the very nature and purpose of religious faith need to be questioned.

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18 'Bangladesh post-poll violence hits minorities' *The Hindu*, January 8, 2014

19 See Garga Chatterjee, *A dangerous connivance, The Hindu, April 6, 2013; and Kolkata Muslims protest against anti-Islamic activities in Bangladesh*; Bangladesh Independent News Network, March 30, 3013

Nineteen eighty-four

Let us now briefly recapitulate the events of 1984. Here is an extract from an article by Hartosh Singh Bal:

> *Many Indians outside Punjab need to be reminded that Bhindranwale was the man who necessitated Operation Bluestar in the first place. He was not alone to blame, this turn of events would not have been possible without considerable help from Indira Gandhi, who, irked by the Akali resistance to the Emergency, had propped him up to challenge the Akali hold over the Sikh orthodoxy. As she discovered, he was not a man so easily controlled and was soon enough acting on his own... Bhindranwale was no thinker. He had no coherent position on any complex issue, but was willing to mouth the rhetoric that ensured the Akalis were afraid of losing their own constituency, and he was willing to do something the Akalis had never done, use violence to achieve political ends. His hitmen, such as Surinder Singh Sodhi, assassinated a number of people who earned his wrath. He had also dabbled in politics, openly supporting Congress candidates against the Akalis at one point and then trying to put up his own candidates for elections to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC)... with little success... This man, a terrorist who thought nothing of using violence to terrorise and kill his opponents, whether Sikhs or Hindus, a man who never enjoyed popular support within the Sikh community... was truly converted into a sant (holy man) by the stupidity of the Indian State..* [20]

And here is Rajdeep Sardesai:

> *whether you travel to the outskirts of Ahmedabad to Citizen Nagar to meet 2002 riot victims living next to a garbage dump, or to the overflowing drains of Tilak Vihar where the widows of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots live, or the makeshift homes for Kashmiri Pandit families in Jammu, the one common factor that binds these groups is the fact that their condition represents the utter failure of the Indian State to uphold the rule of law. This is not about being Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus: it is about a society that doesn't protect and provide justice to its own.* [21]

The two comments summarise our predicament, and I honour these

20 *A Community led by Dunces; Open Magazine*, May 26, 2012

21 'Confront these painful truths about communalism': *Hindustan Times*, November 1, 2013

journalists for their forthright statement of unpleasant truths. What they say is relevant for all of us. Bhindranwale's early social reform activities were soon supplanted by tyrannical behaviour. Despite his affirmations of being apolitical, neither his political interventions nor his links with the senior Congress leadership were a secret. From 1978 onwards, his exhortations and the actions of his followers became extremely violent and intemperate.[22] He hailed the killer of the Nirankari leader Gurbachan Singh in 1980, and flaunted his capacity to wreak physical retribution on his detractors, many of whom were Sikhs. He remains a polarising figure and it is a serious matter that he is still lionised by sections of Sikh society and religious leaders. One of the most moving stories from Sikh history is the legend of Malerkotla, a principality whose ruler was blessed by Guru Gobind Singh for trying to save the lives of the Guru's two sons, bricked alive by the governor of Sirhind. When told that Sher Mohammed Khan, Nawab of Malerkotla had protested vehemently, saying this was contrary to the tenets of Islam, the Guru blessed his house, declaring that its 'roots shall remain forever green.' Malerkotla was a haven of peace in the partition riots, when fleeing Muslims could find shelter there. This legend evokes the immense power of religious faith to inspire love and compassion. Why should such a tradition feel obliged to incorporate a hatemonger into its pantheon?

Delhi was where Mahatma Gandhi was murdered by a follower of V. D. Savarkar for being a lover of Muslims. Gandhi's last fast, in January 1948, was to ensure the return to Muslims of the shrine of Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Chisti. The Delhi Declaration of January 18, 1948, inspired by him, undertook to safeguard communal harmony, return seized religious places and welcome back people who had fled their homes.[23] It was a triumph of love in the midst of an upsurge of hate. Here is an extract from Gandhi's speech on January 18:

> *Delhi is the heart – the capital of India. The leaders from the whole of India have assembled here. Men had become beasts. But if those who have assembled*

22 For contemporary reference material on Bhindranwale, see P.S. Lamba, *Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale: Five Myths*; in *The Sikh Times*, June 6, 2004: http://www.sikhtimes.com/bios_060604a.html

23 In his prayer meeting of November 21, 1947, Gandhi claimed he had received information about the near destruction of 137 mosques in Delhi. *CWMG*, vol 90, p 79. Gandhi Heritage Portal

here, who constitute the cream among men cannot make the whole of India understand that Hindus, Muslims and followers of other religions are like brothers, it bodes ill for both the Dominions. What will be the fate of India if we continue to quarrel with one another?... Let us take no step that may become a cause for repentance later on. The situation demands courage of the highest order from us.'[24]

How did the Congress party degenerate to the point where its senior leaders could preside over a massacre of innocents? Did their subsequent behaviour inspire confidence? Have Congress cadre even heard of the Declaration of 1948? Incidentally, some people celebrated Gandhi's assassination. Sardar Patel had rebuked the RSS leader Golwalkar upon learning that 'RSS men expressed joy and distributed sweets after Gandhiji's death'.[25] A biographer of Gandhi writes:

In the eyes of too many officials, he was an old man who had outlived his usefulness: he had become expendable. By negligence, by indifference, by deliberate desire on the part of many faceless people, the assassination had been accomplished. It was a new kind of murder – the permissive assassination, and there may be many more in the future" [26]

In an echo of this complicity, on February 26, 2003 India's highest officials unveiled a portrait of V D Savarkar in the Lok Sabha.[27] Our representatives have chosen to honour the prime mover in the Gandhi murder case. How is this different from the glorification of Bhindranwale?

When we realise that independent India's criminal justice system was inaugurated by a denial of justice to Gandhi, we need not be surprised at its deterioration ever since. If religious faith is to be trampled upon by men such as Adityanath and Togadia, if Hinduism requires the protection of the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal to remain a living tradition, it is set on a

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24 CWMG; Vol. 90, p 445; Gandhi Heritage Portal. The seven-point Declaration is on page 444

25 D R Goyal; *Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh*; New Delhi; 1979; (republished 2000), p 196

26 Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 647. Readers who wish to study Gandhi's assassination may consult the Jeevan Lal Kapur Inquiry Report of 1969. See: https://archive.org/details/JeevanlalKapoorCommissionReport

27 See Anil Nauriya; *Portrait as mirror*, in *The Hindu*, March 3, 2003 https://www.academia.edu/91244366/Portrait_as_Mirror_By_Anil_Nauriya_The_Hindu_3_March_2003

path of inner strife. A great religious tradition cannot be allowed to become the property of intellectual and moral dwarves. It is one thing to be proud of one's tradition. It is quite another to confuse religious devotion with self-worship. It is vulgar to praise oneself incessantly. Praise is best when it comes from others. These groups have trained themselves in physical belligerence and the hatred of 'alien' ideas to the point of transforming nationalism into xenophobia. They relentlessly inculcate such ideas in children. They portray millions of their fellow Indians as enemies – such language always carries the potential of becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. India's broken middle may only be restored by moderate speech and non-violence. A great deal depends upon how Hindus conduct themselves. I suspect they know this intuitively, for despite the best efforts of such organisations most Hindus are not inclined towards religious extremism.

If various Indian governments resist violence and lawlessness only in the case of Maoists but not across the board, and not in principle, this hypocrisy will undermine state institutions. It is time for the Indian state to implement the law without discriminating between petty criminals, who sometimes get caught, and the high and mighty ones, who are never punished. Those who agitate for a uniform civil code could ask themselves whether India has a uniform criminal code.

Something more needs to be said. Permissive assassinations are coterminous with genocidal consensus. Passive acquiescence in assassination, whether of one person or thousands, is the most ominous legacy of communal ideology. It has undoubtedly been bequeathed to us by history. But have we shown the capacity to confront and overcome our history? Have our political leaders been statesman-like? A single experience of violence is enough to traumatise a person for life. We can imagine the situation if the person is a child. What happens when a society undergoes repeated cycles of violence and injustice? When thousands experience it? Violence enters the soul. Here's what a Pakistani columnist wrote last year: "War is a tragedy but a society at war with itself and everything around, with no objective and no remorse is more than a tragedy; it is a total disaster... Our society is at war with its own religious diversity. It is in a state of schizophrenia passing into paranoia." [28] We may

28 Mobarak Haider, 'A society at war with itself', *Dawn*, January 29, 2013

judge for ourselves if his comments are applicable to India.

Have our religious leaders reached out to the followers of all faiths? Have they spoken up against violence and inhumanity when people desperately needed moral guidance? If this has happened, I confess I have missed something. In the years following 1984 (and speaking for myself) I have gained more comfort from the words and deeds of people such as Gursharan Singh, Satyapal Dang and V P Singh than from any religious leaders I can think of. During the SVA days, I had the honour to meet golden-hearted individuals – ordinary citizens of all faiths, who restored my faith in humanity.[29] It is sad that despite the efforts of such humble stalwarts, the very word 'secularism' is today sneered at by the highest in the land. Messages of love and co-existence are being drowned in the noise of civil war. With honourable exceptions, religious personages have become narrow-minded and eager to acquire wealth and power. Taking such people seriously indicates delusion on the part of the believers. If they continue along this path there will be nothing left of their religions except mindless dogma and moral depravity.

I do not wish to imply that we are doomed to imprisonment in a web of lies. Language itself is impossible without some ideal of truthful speech. Moreover, we humans need to make sense of our past. New generations ask questions, memories are passed on and things bred in darkness cannot forever escape the sunlight. But it is a long and hard passage. It is hard because mass complicity in crime – even at the level of mere feeling – perpetuates communal ideologies and generates self-deception, especially as criminal behaviour becomes normalised. We are in the midst of such a situation now. Powerful forces in society need to cover up the truth – whether about criminal justice, the costs of 'growth', or climate change. The struggle for justice and social betterment is dependent upon an honest dialogue and recounting of the past. Without such a dialogue, we shall remain in an Orwellian labyrinth. 1984 was the point when Indian society submerged itself in propaganda, self-deception and hypocrisy. At present, we show no signs of emerging from these depths. Let us recognise that the scientists of communal identity have succeeded in inventing a machine of perpetual motion, fuelled by human ideas and emotions. The machine will continue to revolve (this is the only visible Indian 'revolution' – the cyclical

29 A brief account of whom may be read in my review article: *Superfluous people*, published online in May 2013, and a copy of which may be read in this volume

return of sectarian violence) as long as we let it. Only a commitment to truth can stop it.

Conclusion

In 1949, George Orwell wrote about the totalitarian nightmare facing humanity, and named his book *1984*. Among his dystopic inventions is a fictional pamphlet about the new order. Every day begins with a Two Minute Hate prayer. The official language is Newspeak. One of its concepts is Crimestop, or protective stupidity. Then there is Doublespeak – "the ability to believe that black is white, and more, to know that black is white, and to forget that one has ever believed the contrary." This demands a continuous alteration of the past. "This day-to-day falsification of the past, carried out by the Ministry of Truth, is as necessary to the stability of the regime as the work of repression and espionage carried out by the Ministry of Love..." He goes on:

> *...the essential act of the Party is to use conscious deception whilst retaining the firmness of purpose that goes with complete honesty. To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and...to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary. Even in using the word doublethink it is necessary to exercise doublethink. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of doublethink one erases this knowledge; and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth.*

About war the pamphlet tells us:

> *It does not matter whether the war is actually happening, and, since no decisive victory is possible, it does not matter whether the war is going well or badly. All that is needed is that a state of war should exist... War, it will now be seen, is a purely internal affair. In the past, the ruling groups of all countries... did fight against one another, and the victor always plundered the vanquished. In our own day they are not fighting against one another at all. The war is waged by each ruling group against its own subjects, and the object of the war is not*

to make or prevent conquests of territory, but to keep the structure of society intact. The very word "war," therefore, has become misleading. It would probably be accurate to say that by becoming continuous war has ceased to exist.[30]

That is the truth about modern conflict – war is not meant to be won, it is meant to be continuous. It is also the truth of what we call communalism. Colonial India's civil war became a post-colonial international war. And yet civil war continues to this day in each successor state. Our condition is such that we genuinely believe our lies; it requires the lie to always be one step ahead of the truth. We too, need to love the infallible Big Brother, 'the face on the hoardings.' Many of us are now habituated to lies and half-truths – speech has been reduced to polemic. Few wish to listen, read, think and reflect. All around us are sociopaths and criminally insane persons armed with warrior myths, whose lust for power poisons the very air we breathe. These pathological creatures do not mean to win the civil war they have generated (and in which task alas, ordinary people assisted them). Rather, they wish it to be a permanent state of affairs. It is up to us whether we shall permit this rampaging injustice to continue unchallenged. Yes, 1984 was India's Orwellian year par excellence. After all, George was born in India.

Day after day, throughout the winter,
We hardened ourselves to live by bluest reason
In a world of wind and frost
– Wallace Stevens

30 *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*; chapter 9, in George Orwell,1984

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JAN 29, 2015 – ESSAY ON THE UNDERMINING OF GANDHI

The Abolition of Truth

We need to stand up and fight the propaganda directed against the Mahatma, and the celebration of his murder. Gandhi belongs to humanity.

> *Ahara-nidra-bhaya-maithunam ca // samanyam etat pasubhir naranam dharmo hi tesam adhiko viseso // dharmena hinah pasubhih samanah*
> *(Hunger, sleep, fear and sex are common to men and animals // What distinguishes men from animals is the knowledge of right and wrong)*
> – (*Bhagwadgita*; Translated by S. Radhakrishnan, 1948, 1971, p 79)

How the world reacted to Mahatma Gandhi's assassination:

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan: He was the only ray of light to help us through these darkest days.

Louis Fischer: Just an old man in a loin cloth in distant India. Yet when he died, humanity wept.

General Douglas MacArthur: Nothing more revolting has occurred in the history of the modern world than the senseless assassination of this venerable man... Gandhiji, however, was one of those prophets who lived far ahead of the times.

Sarojini Naidu: Far greater than all warriors who led armies to battle was this little man, the bravest, the most tried friend of all.

George Bernard Shaw: It shows how dangerous it is to be good... Impressions of Gandhi? You might well ask for someone's impression of the Himalayas.

Rev Martin Luther King: If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable

Earl Mountbatten: Mahatma Gandhi will go down in history on a par with Buddha and Jesus Christ.

Albert Einstein: Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.

Chakravarti Rajagopalachari: I pray that the history of India might be written with the rhythm and tune of the grief that Bharatmata had felt when Mahatma Gandhi fell.

A K Fazlul Huq (ex-Premier of pre-partitioned Bengal): The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most tragic events since the great tragedy of Karbala. It is impossible to find words to express the feelings that are uppermost in our minds. May his soul rest in peace.

> "Civil war broke out in city after city, and in places where the violence occurred late, the knowledge of what had happened previously in other places caused still new extravagances of fanatical zeal, expressed in an elaboration in the methods of seizing power and by unheard-of atrocities in revenge. To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any act of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character... This neither side had any use for conscientious motives; more interest was shown in those who could produce attractive arguments to justify some disgraceful action. As for the citizens who held moderate views, they were destroyed by both the extreme parties...Society had become divided into two ideologically hostile camps, and each side viewed the other with suspicion."
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> – Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, Book 3; circa 431 BC

The advent of the Modi-led BJP government has emboldened the ideologues of religion-based nationalism. They apparently feel that the whole country is now ready for the politics of Gandhi's murderers. Several members of the so-called 'Sangh Parivar' have been making statements of this nature, filled with lies and hateful propaganda. The courtroom speech of the assassin Nathuram Godse is now being widely circulated, with its mixture of self-justification, lies and half-truths. Godse appointed himself

judge, jury and executioner all rolled into one – with lots of help from his mentor V D Savarkar, the presiding deity of the Hindutva version of nationalism. Many terrorists do likewise – they decide guilt and they carry out the punishment. I'm all for an open airing of political and religious beliefs. Will our rulers arrange for the writings of Charu Mazumdar, J.S. Bhindranwale, the Hizbul Mujahideen, ULFA and Prabhakaran to be sold in India's railway stations? Hitler's Mein Kampf already sells widely. Why not? We're a democracy after all.

Our polity is now faced with an assault on the mind. Our very sense of discrimination between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and falsehood is under attack. We live in an ideological climate of nihilism, wherein human life is of no consequence, and conversation is fast evaporating. It is time thoughtful Indians of every political inclination asked themselves a simple question: Has the new-found status of the 'Parivar' made us take leave of our senses? A fanatical conspirator enters a prayer meeting open to all and shoots dead a 79-year-old unarmed and unguarded man at point-blank range. For nearly seven decades, one section of our intelligentsia looked upon the murderer as a martyr and hailed his act as it were something admirable. Today these fans of Godse and Savarkar are thrusting their hate-filled ideas down our throats.

What is this if not the brazen celebration of communal terrorism and murder?

Let us be clear about this – if Godse's preparedness for death signifies something virtuous to the 'parivar', the activities of all the jehadis, maoists, khalistanis and sundry insurgents across the sub-continent also become virtuous. Don't all terrorists have their admirers? How do we adjudge one brand of murder as virtue and another as evil? Why are MPs, MLAs and other persons close to the highest executives of the BJP government engaged in white-washing political assassination?

The 'Parivar' is distinguished not only by its avowal of communal violence and revenge killings. The Home Ministry under Sardar Patel banned them on February 4, 1948. Patel also said that "a fanatical wing of the Mahasabha directly under Savarkar" had hatched the conspiracy and seen it through. (Letter to Nehru on Feb 27, 1948, vol 6 of his correspondence, edited by Durga Das). However, Savarkar's 'parivar' is now in power, and still engages in shameless and systematic character-assassination. These days we may see this activity in the comments section

of various news portals, where Gandhi is subject to vicious abuse on daily basis.

One big lie is that Gandhi was responsible for the partition of India, overlooking the fact that he referred to partition as a sin, and resisted it to the end of his days. He accepted it with sorrow only after the leadership of the Congress, most importantly Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru recommended it as the only way out of the political crisis of 1946-47. The truth is complex and it is a matter of shame that senior leaders of the so-called Sangh Parivar should be spreading falsehood and half-truths for narrow partisan ends. If the Two Nation Theory was false and evil, why did their hero V D Savarkar support it? Here is what he said on August 15, 1943: *"I have no quarrel with Mr Jinnah's two-nation theory. We Hindus are a nation by ourselves and it is a historical fact that Hindus and Muslims are two nations."* (Indian Annual Register 1943 vol.2 p.10).

The other big lie is that Gandhi did not condemn Muslim fanaticism, was more concerned with the protection of Muslims and ignored the plight of Hindu victims of communal violence. This is utter nonsense, yet repeated day in and day out. In his speeches at his prayer meetings and in his writings Gandhi makes it clear time and again that good and bad people were to be found in all communities, that no community held a monopoly of good and evil. In November 1946, he spent several weeks walking in the areas around Noakhali, in Chittagong division of East Bengal, where Hindus had been the victims of communal violence. He stayed there and walked for 190 kms, speaking of the need for repentance, harmony, and justice. This was in the face of the hostility of the Muslim League provincial government and the vicious behaviour of their cadre towards him. Some of their tallest functionaries even accused him of instigating the massacres in Calcutta. They repeatedly called him the arch enemy of Muslims.

When Gandhi went to Bihar early in 1947 to calm the communal fires there (here, conversely, Muslims were targeted), he was accused of being partial to Muslims. The same accusations were hurled at him in August 1947, when he remained in Calcutta. In his speech in Delhi (January 18, 1948) calling off his last fast, he referred to a Muslim visitor in Patna who had given him a book by a cleric, in which he read that kafirs deserved to be exterminated. Gandhi denounced and despaired of such views (which were also condemned by Maulana Azad that same evening). The entire

commentary may be read on page 446, vol 90 of the collected works. Such observations are indeed available throughout his writings and speeches. But both kinds of religious extremists relentlessly accused him of being partial to the other side. For them, nothing but total submission to their hateful worldview would suffice.

Yet another lie is that his last fast was directed at forcing the Union Government to part with the Rs 55 crores owed to Pakistan. Undoubtedly Gandhi wanted the Union Government to fulfil its obligation to hand over to Pakistan what was rightfully its property. But the facts show clearly that his fast was meant to calm the fires of communal hatred and violence then raging in Delhi and North India, and to secure the restoration of the tomb of Khwaja Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Chisti in Mehrauli. Had he not staked his life for this cause, we would have had another Babri-type fabricated dispute on the edge of the capital. Gandhi's last fast, or yajna, as he called it, led to the Delhi Declaration of January 18, 1948, which was agreed to by all parties and groups, including the Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. This declaration was a solemn commitment to uphold communal harmony and friendship among all communities, to refrain from revenge attacks on innocent people, and to return all places of worship to their rightful owners. As Rajkumari Amrit Kaur said, "*With his infinite love he was trying to quench the anger that raged in many breasts. He was the one thing that stood between us and disaster, for lawlessness and disorder and hate and violence can lead nowhere else.*"

Gandhi's words and speeches at his prayer meetings in the last weeks of his life are easily available in volume 90 of his Collected Works on the Gandhi Heritage Portal.

An avowal of political assassination

Here are some of the recent utterance of members of the 'Parivar'

Sakshi Maharaj reveals the BJP's long standing tie to Nathuram Godse
Godse should have killed Nehru, says Kesari edit
Hindu Mahasabha head speaks to FP: Godse was a 'martyr' and 'patriot'
Hindu Mahasabha to build Godse's temple
Site identified in Lucknow for Godse temple: Hindu outfit ...
Hindu Mahasabha performs 'Bhumi pujan' for Godse temple ...
Nathuram Godse Temple | The Indian Express

These utterances are an avowal of political murder. They undermine the ethic of lawful government and they corrode the authority and legitimacy of the Indian Union. Those who have been trained in communal half-truths and deceit for decades will not be able to see what is dangerous about this new-found bravado of the Godse-brigade. But responsible citizens hope that judges, IAS and IPS officers and other constitutional officials can see the Parivar undermining the integrity of the state. The portents are not good. When India's Chief Justice makes a gushing statement about the 'goodness' of Narendra Modi, it gives rise to concern about his impartiality. (See Professor Upendra Baxi's opinion).

If state officials – including elected representatives – forget that they are servants of the Constitution, not of the government of the day; if they let fear and timidity affect their official performance, let them understand that they are contributing to the subversion of the Constitution. In which case, they should refrain from talking about Maoist subversion in future. The elected representatives are worse than the Maoists because they are sworn to uphold the law of the land.

Do Prime Minister Modi, his party colleagues, and their RSS mentors believe in and support vigilante violence and political assassination? *If they do not, they should come out and say so.* If they do, on what grounds can they ask insurgent groups to give up violence? The Kesari article demonstrates yet again the Sangh Parivar's contempt for law. There's no point saying this is not the official position of the BJP, or that these are 'fringe elements'. The RSS is not a fringe of the BJP. The BJP is a front of the RSS. So are the VHP, Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini, ABVP, BMS and a host of other organisations. Is there any doubt that most cadre and followers of the RSS political family hold these beliefs? Have the leaders of the RSS distanced themselves from such ideas? It is all very well to be clever and dodgy, but cleverness cannot forever substitute for truthful speech.

Beyond good and evil?

The editor of a prominent news portal has written an opinion piece where he argues that the debate about Gandhi's assassination requires us to go 'beyond the binary of good and evil'. His argument shifts imperceptibly towards matters of public perception and relativism: *"If someone has a*

right to eulogise Gandhi, surely others have a right to criticise him or praise his nemesis? If we can today write books giving imaginary versions of Ravana's side of the story (and not Ram's), surely we can live with the ideas of those who think Godse was not pure evil?". Well put. Of course, we can live (and die) with the murderous ideas floating around us. We have been doing so for decades. Even when such ideas are aired by the highest in the land, as in 'when a great tree falls, the earth shakes'; and 'every action has an equal and opposite reaction' – etc.

But who has questioned anyone's right to an opinion?

The editor continues: "*The only thing absolutely wrong about what Godse did was putting bullets through the Mahatma instead of debating him and converting the Indian public to his cause. But, at that time, the public was besotted with Gandhi and unwilling to listen to others. Godse's ideas were checkmated by Gandhi's popularity, and this frustration drove him to murder…*"

What does it mean to say, "The only thing wrong about what Godse did"? As far as public debate is concerned, what else did he 'do' aside from killing Gandhi? The murder is precisely the point at issue. Would this debate be taking place at all if Gandhi had not been killed? Or if Hindutva ideologues were not defending political assassination? Incidentally, it is also incorrect to say "the public was besotted with Gandhi". He was immensely popular, but there were also people who hated him, and during his last *upavas*, there were demonstrations of large numbers of refugees from Pakistan who shouted, 'let Gandhi die'

Well before January 1948, the Mahasabha and Savarkar had attacked Gandhi in speech and print. The editor fails to note that (aside from several physical assaults and attempts at inflicting serious injury on him, right from his days in South Africa) there was a bomb attack in 1934, an attempted train derailment in 1946, another such in 1947, and two more attacks in January 1948, the last of which killed him. All these involved persons and groups that objected to his ideal of composite nationhood, and of Hindu-Muslim unity.

But it is not the ideas of Hindutva that are being discussed, noxious though they were (and remain). It is the fact that the men around Savarkar were hell-bent on murder. The editor may well deflect the discussion into an argument about the respective merits of Savarkar's ideas and the right of people to hold such ideas. But he ought not to trivialise the murder by

saying "the only thing absolutely wrong about what Godse did was putting bullets through the Mahatma", because the *assassination is the central issue that has been highlighted by the admirers of Godse themselves*. His brother Gopal Godse is on record stating his pride in the deed. One opinion piece in an RSS journal has even stated that Godse should have killed Nehru, and many others have spoken admiringly of Godse's deed.

These days, India's Prime Minister invokes Gandhi at every available opportunity. As journalist Sandipan Sharma says, "*the PM's efforts to eulogise, emulate and hard sell the Mahatma should have by now triggered a Munnabhai-type revival of the Gandhian ideals in India. And yet, ironically, the exact opposite is happening: it is Godse's cult that appears set for a cultural renaissance*." He goes on: "There are many pitfalls of turning Godse into a hero… once you defend Godse's action, the same logic can be extended to every terrorist who kills for his ideology – *political or religious – making it impossible to differentiate between the assassins of Gandhi, the butchers of Peshawar and the perpetrators of 9/11 or 26/11. None of these were seeking personal vendetta; all were promoting their political ideologies through violent means. The people who valourise Godse are, at the core, firm believers in Hindutva, in the two-nation theory. For them, Indian secularism is their biggest enemy and Godse is a hero for having killed one of its biggest proponents. For them, Gandhi is not the man who helped India win freedom and the world discover the merits of ahimsa over violence; he is the person who helped create Pakistan*…"

The question of violence

What is wrong with the manner in which the apologists of the 'parivar' discuss this issue? It is the fact that **the act of murder** is lost sight of, and we prefer to keep our attention focused on the stated motives of the murderers. The same may be said for protests against this or that film, book, cartoon, etc. Note the current campaign by the Savarkarites to bring in the pain of partition as the justification for the murder of Gandhi. Who can deny the pain of partition? But what does that have to do with murdering Gandhi? How does it justify political assassination?

There's no doubt that the world is complex, as are the motives of human beings. We wish good and evil to be clearly demarcated, but unfortunately, they often come in mixtures. Gandhi was well aware of

this. For him, the fact that in the *Mahabharata* the wrong doers had good men like Bhishma and Drona on their side was a sign that, *"evil cannot by itself flourish in this world. It can do so only if it is allied with some good"*. He wrote this in 1926 and remained consistent in his belief. In 1940, he said, *"Goondas do not drop from the sky, nor do they spring from the earth like evil spirits. They are the product of social disorganization, and society is therefore responsible for their existence… they should be looked upon as a symbol of corruption in our body-politic"*. Confronted by riots in 1946 he said, *"I deprecate the habit of procuring a moral alibi for ourselves by blaming it all on the goondas. We always put the blame on goondas. But it is we who are responsible for their creation as well as encouragement"*. At the height of the violence of 1947 he said, *"it is time for peace-loving citizens to assert themselves and isolate goondaism. Non-violent non-cooperation is the universal remedy. Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living in and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives it is withdrawn."*

However, complexity does not abolish the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil. To arrive at that point would be to leave behind the capacity that makes us humans. Goodness is indeed a first principle – we can't define it in simpler terms. Disagreement between people about what is good or bad would be impossible if they did not first agree that there is a difference between good and bad.

The central question of our time is violence, not the multifarious justifications produced by those who practice violence. Violence feeds on itself, it has always done and will always do. Those who still cannot see this are doomed to remain in an endless cycle of argumentation and intimidation. That is why Gandhi remains relevant. Above all, he was an advocate of friendship and dialogue. He stood for *atma-bal*, or soul-force and *satya-bal* (truth force) as against *sharir-bal*, or physical force. He read all the religious scriptures and asked his fellow Indians to do the same. He concentrated on what was common to them, rather than on dogma and doctrine. He drew sustenance from the fact that there were good persons among all communities, and that was proof enough that their faith must have provided them with an impulse toward goodness. In the worst of circumstances, in the midst of utter barbarity, in Noakhali, Patna, Delhi and wherever he went in those last weeks of his life, he appealed to the wrong-doers to look inwards, to remember their common humanity, to

recognise the evil they had wrought, to repent *(prayaschit)* and change their ways.

Gandhi was an optimist of the soul. We need him as much today as we needed him in 1948. Even those who hate him need him, an old horse upon whose tired back we can off-load all our remorse and anger and pain. Well may the 'Parivar' hail his assassins (there were more than one). They seek to kill him yet again, to wipe out the last sweet traces of his memory from our minds. But to do that, they would have to abolish the very human capacity to love, smile and befriend people. As Gandhi said, "*The force of love is the same as the force of the soul or truth. We have evidence of its working at every step.*" As long as we retain those capacities, they will fail.

On January 31, 1948, as India and indeed the whole world was plunged in grief (barring those whom Sardar Patel accused of distributing sweets), the *Hindusthan Standard* published a black front page, with three simple sentences: *Gandhiji has been killed by his own people for whose redemption he lived. This second crucifixion in the history of the world has been enacted on a Friday – the same day Jesus was done to death one thousand nine hundred and fifteen years ago. Father forgive us.*

The Indian people need to stand up and fight against the propaganda directed against Mahatma Gandhi, and the celebration of his murder by people whose minds are crazed by hatred, ignorance and spite. It is a crying shame that this campaign is being led by people who are close to or indeed, members of the ruling dispensation. It will bring them nothing but disgrace. Gandhi belongs to humanity. The Reverend Martin Luther King said: "If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought, and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore him at our own risk."

Ishwar Allah Tere Nam
Sabko Sanmati De Bhagwan
(Gandhi's favourite devotional song)

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FEBRUARY 12, 2015, THE INDIAN EXPRESS

The Tyranny of Hurt Sentiment

Shirin Dalvi, the editor of the Bombay edition of Urdu newspaper *Avadhnama* has become the latest victim of the running saga over cartoons. Since mid-January, when she unwittingly published a Charlie Hebdo cover, she has been slapped with criminal charges, her newspaper shut down, its employees rendered jobless, and she herself forced underground. Vicious threats are sent to her via social media. All this is happening despite her printed apology. The police have opposed anticipatory bail on the ground that it would cause a law and order problem (aren't they paid to deal with such matters?).

The man who filed the complaint heads an Urdu journalists' body. He is cited as saying "I filed a case against her and I am happy that she was arrested. If she was in an Islamic state, she would have been beheaded as per law." That the freedom of speech could be so flagrantly attacked in the name of religion is by now, a common experience. Self-appointed guardians of faith have attacked our minds with relentless aggression for years. But that someone could wish a horrible death to another human being is itself highly offensive to many of us – and this person thinks it earns him merit in the eyes of Allah. I have no access to the mind of the Almighty, but if indeed He wishes innocent children to live in fear and their mother live as a hunted animal, to my mind such a deity deserves not worship but contempt. I can't prove it, but venture to suggest that Allah is

more considerate than some of his followers.

Hurt sentiment has become the cutting edge of tyranny. It is the perpetually available political tool for preparing 'spontaneous' mob violence, violating the law, mobilising fascist movements and intimidating everyone – especially within the preferred community – who disagrees with communal politics. It becomes worse when responsible persons glamorise this fake and vicious form of piety. Sentiment appeared in the law in the aftermath of the Rangila Rasul case of 1929, when the publisher Rajpal was murdered in Lahore by a 19-year-old youth named Ilm Din. The boy pleaded guilty, against the advice of his lawyer MA Jinnah – this is widely reported as the only case Jinnah ever lost. (I am informed that this is not true).

The philosopher Allama Iqbal led the funeral ceremony, at which he reportedly declared: "This uneducated young man has surpassed us, the educated ones." One of pre-Independence India's outstanding thinkers had no qualms in glorifying murder in the name of hurt sentiment. Ilm Din is now revered as a *ghazi (one who defends the faith)* in Pakistan. This is akin to the reverence accorded to V.D. Savarkar, a prime accused in the Gandhi murder case, not to mention the glorification of men like Bhindranwale and Nathuram Godse.

Section 295-A, which penalises offensive utterances was framed in the aftermath of that case. Jinnah helped frame the Act and stressed that it should apply only to cases of deliberate and malicious intent. The misuse of this law in India is well-documented. Pakistan augmented it with the death penalty for blasphemy. Punjab's governor, Salman Taseer was murdered by his bodyguard for merely suggesting that the law be re-examined, against the context of the Asia Bibi case. His killer has now acquired heroic status, and his appeal is led by a former chief justice of Punjab. Instead of advocating the non-violent resolution of conflicts, members of the elite have added fuel to the flames. A society whose philosophers, lawyers and judges think it fit to celebrate revenge killing is doomed to an infinite spiral of extremism.

The topic of blasphemy has always been suffused with blood thirst. Let us be clear that Shirin Dalvi is not merely being harassed by a complainant who is aided and abetted by a mean-spirited police and government. Formal harassment is only part of the story. More significant is the violence that underpins all the arguments, phone-calls, arrests, social-media posts

etc. Dalvi is exposed to violence, with the active connivance of the state, which is supposed to protect her. By referring to beheadings and sharia law, the complainant is creating an ambience of murderous hate around this hapless woman. Can he not see that his behavior mimics hateful propaganda directed towards religious minorities and other vulnerable groups in India? In this case too, a minority is being oppressed. Shirin is a minority of one. Those who oppress minorities themselves have no business complaining about the oppression of minorities.

Islamic theology does not always lead in a tyrannical direction. The ideas of the Egyptian religion professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Sudanese thinker Mahmoud Mohammed Taha are worthy of respect. These learned scholars were persecuted for advocating liberal readings of the Quran and Hadith. Abu Zayd was forced to divorce his wife and flee Egypt in the mid-1990s. Mohammed Taha was executed in 1985 by a sharia court under the regime of the dictator Nimiery. We would also profit from a study of the lives of famous Muslims from the national movement, such as Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Maulana Azad; not to mention lesser known ones like Bibi Amtus Salaam, whom Gandhi used to call his daughter.

A war of conscience is underway for the soul of Islam. The Dalvi case is merely the latest example. In July 2013, a lecture by the American Islamic scholar Amina Wadud was cancelled by the Centre for Islamic Studies in Madras, because of threats received via an SMS. The leader of a little-known communal outfit had called the police and threatened an agitation. Instead of providing protection to the event, the police intimidated the organisers, who gave in. Why does the freedom of conscience and speech apply only for providing state protection to petty tyrants and blackmailers, and not to those who wish to criticise religion or to study alternative religious currents? What message do governments send to society by encouraging goondas and oppressing people of mild temper? What will happen to the rule of law if this continues?

Would the complainant in the Dalvi case kindly reflect on whether his religion contains some resources for restraint and compassion? Or is it, in his view, a compendium of justifications for working up murderous rage in the faithful? If the latter is the case, he is no different from those who hounded M.F. Hussain out of India and who now wish to deify Nathuram Godse. Whether he knows it or not, he is acting in their interest. His actions will not benefit Islam, rather, fanatics of other brands will be doubly

energised. However, if he can find something gentle in his faith, let him use it as inspiration to withdraw the case.

Those of us who are more offended by gratuitous violence than by cartoons, must defend Shirin Dalvi. We must demand that the government provide her with protection, investigate those threatening her (didn't the police arrest a young woman for FB posts at the time of Thackeray's funeral?), and instruct the state prosecutors to drop the case. We have had it up to our throats with fabricated outrage. We too are angry at the police and government repeatedly surrendering their responsibility to protect peaceable citizens from hooligans wearing religious masks. Down with the tyranny of sentiment.

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FEBRUARY 14, 2015 – AUTHOR'S INTERVIEW IN SCROLL.IN

Democracy and workers' movements – stories from the history of Jamshedpur

In January 2015, in an unprecedented honour, Prime Minister Narendra Modi released a special commemorative coin to mark the 175th birth anniversary of Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, the founder of the Tata Group. While the company came in for much praise from the government for its commitment to the nation, the Tata story is also a case of the rich rewriting history to extoll their virtues. Dilip Simeon's research monograph *The Politics of Labour Under late Colonialism: Workers, Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur 1928-1939*; has a different story to tell in this interview to Ajaz Ashraf which appeared in Scroll.in in February 2015

> *The Modi government has issued a special coin to commemorate the 175th birth anniversary of the Tata Group founder, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata. In honouring him, what is the message the government is seeking to convey to the people?*

The government may have honoured other corporate houses in some other manner, but to take out a commemorative coin of the Indian Union honouring a corporate house is indeed unique. I suppose the message is that the Tatas are model employers, builders of modern India, in short, to take on board everything the Tatas would probably like to say about themselves.

Isn't this also linked to Modi's Make-in-India project?

Perhaps the message being conveyed through the commemorative coin is part of a political agenda. This is because the Tatas are supposed to be a national industry. In the 1920s, there was much talk about how the Tatas needed to be patronised by the Indian national movement. In 1924, they obtained Swarajist support (from Motilal Nehru and CR Das) for tariff protection in the Central Legislative Assembly, in return for their recognition of the first workers union, the Jamshedpur Labour Association. However, at other times such as in the 1930s, the Tatas would assume a less national demeanour because the extreme tension between the colonial government and the national leaders made it wise for them to maintain a distance.

When the coin was issued in early January, both Modi and the Tata website spoke of Jamsetji's vision of making India an industrially strong country. To what extent do you think this is true? Could his vision, however defined, have been executed without the help of the British?

To be fair, the two things are not necessarily counterposed to each other. It may well be that Jamsetji was a visionary industrialist. I won't go into the background of Tata Sons, which began as a shipping concern in the nineteenth century and was involved in the opium trade with China.

But it is claimed that the opium trade was legitimate and, therefore, it wasn't ethically wrong for the Tatas to have got into it?

Fair enough, and we don't have to go into that debate. The two positions, as I said, may not necessarily be contradictory – that Jamsetji was a visionary and he also took the assistance of the British. If however you were to go deeper into it, you will realise that strategic interests influenced the British support of the Tatas in every possible way, including securing land (Jamshedpur) located close to coal mines and iron ore deposits and the river, all of which were necessary for a steel plant.

The construction of the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) began in 1907, and it began production in 1911. Soon thereafter, World War I broke out. Almost 100 per cent of the steel that TISCO was producing went towards the British war effort. I presume these were consumed by the railways or for the manufacture of building materials, armaments

etc. One can see that for strategic-military purposes, the British were clear about maintaining a strong industrial base in India.

In other words, the Tatas had no option but to work with the British…

They had to. Let us have no illusion – if you want to build a gigantic steel plant like TISCO with geo-strategic importance, which requires infrastructure such as railways, then you have to work with the power that exists. We cannot fault the Tatas for doing that. They had to do it.

Did this prompt the British to extend special privileges to the Tatas? For instance, Jamshedpur was acquired under zamindari rights. Your book says they got 25 sq miles in return for paying Rs 12,000 as compensation to the raiyats. The Tatas were also not required to pay revenue to the government. Was the compensation money adequate?

Frankly, I would need to do more research to figure out whether or not Rs 12,000 can be classified as adequate compensation. But you can figure out – 25 sq miles and the Rs 12,000 payment for loss of livelihood involving thousands and thousands of people. It was arguably not adequate.

Was it extraordinary for the Tatas not to pay revenue?

It was extraordinary. The land was granted to them under zamindari right, and zamindars were normally required to pay revenue to the government. The Tatas were exempted from that payment. They were also given full municipal control over the city.

Was the Tatas' architectural conception of Jamshedpur remarkably unequal, in contrast to the relatively more recent accounts about the family's intrinsic humanity? You talk of executives residing in bungalows lining the boulevards and TISCO employees living in makeshift houses in the bastis.

The attitude of the elite and the industrialists then was that, well, they were doing a favour to people by giving people jobs. That attitude persists even today. For instance, people in Bawana, in Delhi, live in near-destitute conditions right now. So, a hundred years ago, workers of Jamshedpur might even have been slightly better off than they are today.

Having said that, yes, they did have a very elitist approach to the architectural layout of Jamshedpur. The areas designated for housing

workers soon got overcrowded because of the vast influx of informal labour.

Your book mentions high incidence of dacoity, killings…

This was because there was a huge growth of population with the expansion of TISCO and other ancillary industries in Jamshedpur. There was a large influx of people from outside Singhbhum district, in which Jamshedpur is located.

As I found out from the records, the Tatas had a deliberate policy of hiring people from all around the country. In fact, Jamsetji suggested that the Tatas follow a policy of recruiting workers from a wide catchment area in order to prevent strikes. This was the same attitude that the East India Company adopted vis-a-vis the army after 1857, that is, they didn't wish to raise an army composed of soldiers speaking the same language and who could congregate. At least partly, the Tatas' hiring policy was aimed at ensuring that the workers did not combine easily.

However, as it happened, the workers did unite and combine despite the best efforts of the Tatas. Questions of language, region, caste and religion did not matter to Jamshedpur's working class. From my studies of over 20-25 years of Jamshedpur's working class, I can say that they were not subject to the divisiveness of caste and community.

Your book talks of managerial despotism in TISCO's early years. The American TW Tutwiler, who was TISCO's general manager between 1916 and 1925, was particularly notorious. What was this despotism all about?

The philosophy was that the manager ought to be able to throw out a workman at will, anytime. The hiring and firing of people on the spot was what, in essence, managerial despotism meant, so that people could never assume that they had a stable job. This became part of managerial culture in Chota Nagpur and lasted till the early forties. The manager's right to hire and fire workers conduced to an atmosphere of anxiety and fear.

For instance, it was known those days that Tutwiler could not tolerate anyone overtaking his car. Of course, people remarking upon that time say that this was typically the robust attitude of managers in those good old days. But how all this must have appeared to workers is

quite another matter.

In his book 'The Story of Tata Steel', Verrier Elwin notes, "But perhaps it (despotism) was the only way to get the Steel Works going." Do you agree with Elwin's view?

I don't think the managerial attitude at TISCO would have been markedly different from industry in other parts of India. Managerial despotism existed everywhere in the country. It took the workers many years to win job stability and the right to choose their own leaders.

So, the Tatas were behaving just like anyone else?

Yes, there was no exceptional virtue in the management style of the Tatas. From my studies of the early phase of TISCO's life, the Tatas were quite despotic in those days, even afterwards. There was nothing remarkable in their attitude towards workers. Over the years, of course, things got tempered because there was a national movement, and there was pressure on management from within a section of the national movement. But the rights that the workers won were all hard fought for. It was not because of the generosity of the Tatas.

From 1920 onwards labour-management relations in TISCO deteriorated, largely because of the mutual suspicion between them. From your narrative, it appears that among the initial triggers was RD Tata's duplicity – he claimed the company's finances didn't permit an increase in wages, yet the balance sheet, published in 1922, showed a net profit of Rs 88 lakh. Why did the Tatas take recourse to such a lie?

I cannot answer this question specifically. I'd need to study this more because it involves the very specific issue about profit and the capacity to pay wages and so on. But if we shift a little ahead, say, to the late 1920s, then it is a fact that there was unrest among workmen and on the other hand, the Tatas were keen on shedding a proportion of their workforce. There is evidence that the Tatas were keenly aware of the monetary advantages that would accrue from a strike. The managers expected an increase in profits, and the police noted that the directors would rather welcome a strike. I've placed the historical evidence for this in my book.

Are you saying that the Tatas were letting strikes happen?

Not exactly. To begin with, there was only one major strike, between May and September of 1928. Trouble was brewing from 1927 – I won't go into previous cases of workers unrest, in the early 1920s. But 1927-28 was when they were seized of the requirement to reduce the wage bill. This was because the demand had dipped after the first boom period during WW I. Then the British were purchasing almost all the steel that TISCO was producing and there was profitability. In addition, the early phase of construction, when large numbers of workers had been hired, was long over. The Tatas were therefore keen to reduce the workforce.

Simultaneously, there was tension at the workplace – between workers and supervisors. Some of the crane-drivers were particularly militant. Archival data shows that behind the scenes, TISCO management was keenly aware of the advantages that might accrue to them if a strike were to occur. So, we can't say that the 1928 strike was absolutely inevitable. The strike did happen and ultimately, a certain proportion of the workforce was reduced, and the Tatas did indeed achieve their main goals.

So, did the Tatas tacitly encourage a section of workers to strike? Or was it that they, by design, refused to accept the demands of workers in the hope they would strike?

Historians have to stick to facts as far as possible. Let me say that such situations are always very complex, as are motivations. One can't even come to a conclusion about motivations simply by reading documents. You have to have intuitions. One intuition I have is that the workers' leader Maneck Homi, and the Tatas had a special animus towards each other. The workers chose Maneck Homi as their leader. We can understand this as the desire of workers to be represented by someone whom Tatas disliked. People used to refer to TISCO as a Parsi industry. Homi was also a Parsi. A counter-Parsi to the Tatas.

The situation got exacerbated because the Tatas didn't want to have anything to do with the strike committee led by Homi. Management said they would deal only with the Jamshedpur Labour Association (JLA), which was itself the creation of workers, but which, over time had been domesticated, shall we say. In addition, it's clear that workers were becoming too 'intractable and impertinent', as a senior police

officer noted. In one noting the General Manager complained that "*even the sweepers say they should share in the Company's profits… men are talking of having their own committees which must be consulted in giving increments, promotions… in other words, pucca Bolshevism…they must be put back in their proper place*." It is interesting that apart from economic interests, emotional, psychological factors could also be seen at play in the tension between workers, managers, supervisors, and leaders.

Despite the Leninist mythology that workers are incapable of thinking about their actions, and need political guidance, the evidence from the history of TISCO tells another story. In 1928 its workers formed a strike committee when they realised the JLA was not willing to or able to represent their interests. They realised they needed someone who was literate in English, who could read and draft documents, who was a lawyer, who could take on the Tatas. They found Homi.

What was Maneck Homi all about? Why did the Tatas dislike him?

Maneck Homi's father was a mechanical foreman and Tata employee. He fell foul of the Tatas, and was dismissed in 1925. I assume the young Maneck must have heard embittered comments about Tata management. Homi himself went to study iron and steel manufacturing in America. He was denied financial assistance by the Tatas; nor did he secure a job with them upon return.

Who knows, TISCO managers may have turned down Homi because they didn't like his father. One can't surmise, but it is a possibility. Thereafter, Maneck became a bitter critic of the Tatas. He appeared before the Tariff commission, which dealt with the levying of governmental duties on export and import and made adverse remarks against the Tatas. Ironically, he even suggested reduction in the workforce.

In March 1928, the workers got in touch with Homi and requested him to represent them. There was tension between the JLA and the strike committee. But the workers weren't keen on displacing the JLA. As a speaker said at one of the strike meetings, "we must mend it, not end it."

Then things began to get worse with departmental strikes, including sweepers and boiler-men. On May 1, 1928 TISCO locked

out 4000 workers, and activist workers congregated around Homi's leadership. They demanded that management negotiate with him. But the Tatas refused to negotiate with the strike committee. Shortly afterward, 1500 skilled workmen were dismissed – the District Commissioner JR Dain thought this to be a deliberate provocation. TISCO said they wouldn't negotiate with any committee which had Homi as its leader. Then it became a question whether or not workers had the right to be represented by an outsider. And Homi was an outsider. However, outsiders had represented workers before.

This question of whether the workers had the right to choose their representatives, regardless of them being insiders or outsiders, became an ego issue between them and the management. The workers resented the management's refusal to deal with Homi.

So, they saw in Homi a person in whom they could repose faith?

They had full faith in Homi. The workers loved him for the forthright position he took, for the manner in which he expressed their demands. Moreover, the workers were denied the chance to bring about a change in the JLA leadership, by electing new office-bearers. The management achieved this through a secret deal with CF Andrews.

Why did CF Andrews jump into Jamshedpur?

CF Andrews was then the secretary of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and was responsible for organising internal elections in unions affiliated to it. I am an admirer of Andrews, but the fact is that as AITUC leader, for reasons best known to him, he thought it necessary to postpone the JLA's internal election. The need to protect a 'national industry' from avoidable militancy was probably uppermost in his mind. The problem was that the workers were genuinely agitated. I have seen managerial correspondence to the effect that they had arranged for the 'JLA elections' to be 'postponed indefinitely'. This meant that the radical faction of workers could not elect those whom they wanted to represent them. It led to a schism – the workers went ahead with the strike committee, which the management saw as communists. The GM was now saying this was "a fight as to who is going to run the place – Management or the Communists." His refusal to negotiate with the workers preferred leader prolonged the strike. Ultimately, the only

solution was to rope in someone else to mediate.

This was when Subhas Chandra Bose stepped into the picture?

Yes. Those were the days Subhas Bose was trying to emerge as a strong labour leader. I've found remarks wherein he refers to himself as a "controller of labour." Since the Tatas were unwilling to negotiate with the strike committee, it was arranged to bring Bose into the picture. This was brought about by Tata management and national leaders. He came to Jamshedpur in August-September,1928, and began by asking the Bengali clerical staff to strike work, thus demonstrating that he was on the side of the strikers. The Bengali clerical staff was dominated by the JLA. Bose took them on board, made some fiery speeches, and then negotiated a settlement with the Tatas. Strike pay was not given (the Strike Committee called it lock-out wages), and many workers lost their jobs.

Bose said that the settlement was the best that could be had at that point of time. The workers however, felt that the settlement didn't match their expectations – whether in terms of emoluments, supervisory behaviour, layoffs, or redundancy. As a result, the advent of Bose simply proved to be a way out of the impasse, by which everyone managed to save face.

So, the Tatas, the management and Bose were all playing a game?

Whether or not it can be called a game, the complex pre-history of the strike shows that there were energetic calculations and manoeuvres amongst managers, colonial officials, and national leaders to defuse the crisis, use it to achieve managerial ends, and after that, to get the workers back to work. This was achieved at the expense of workers. There was a lot of tension at the workplace after the strike ended.

When the commemorative coin in honour of Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata was issued in January, the Tata website noted that it was because of his vision that the group introduced pension and gratuity schemes way back in 1877. Yet, in a speech delivered to TISCO workers on Oct 17, 1931, you quote Subhash Chandra Bose demanding, among other things, the introduction of gratuity and pension schemes "promised for years." Would you say the Tatas have re-written history?

Yes, this speech may be found in the Netaji Collected Works. What is interesting is the background against which Bose made the statement. For a while, Bose became leader of the JLA and he'd come regularly to Jamshedpur. In the immediate aftermath of the strike, the workers had realised that the JLA had served only to end the impasse. Within a matter of weeks, Homi set up the Jamshedpur Labour Federation (JLF). There was now another union within TISCO. Again, a product of the working class movement. In 1929, the JLF became very popular.

Then came an upsurge of the national movement. On January 26, 1930, Homi had joined a national flag-hoisting ceremony. This may indicate a signal towards Bose, and also that workers were drawn towards the independence struggle, so Homi couldn't keep aloof from it. Meanwhile, 1930 saw two cases instituted against him. In one case Homi was accused of embezzling union funds; in the other case he was accused of intimidating a supervisor. In the 1980s, I interviewed one supervisor, an elderly gentleman, who had retired as a middle-level Tata employee. He told me that these cases were fabricated.

That was the time Bose made the statement. In 1930 he had already made conciliatory moves towards Maneck Homi. He must have said these things on basis of fair knowledge of the workers' grievances. Certainly, the claims made by the Tatas (of gratuity and pension schemes) would not have been correct for TISCO at that time. They may have introduced it for certain sections of their employees, or in their concerns elsewhere. It was not a norm in Jamshedpur.

What happened to Homi? You said the Tatas fabricated the cases against Homi?

It's a complicated story, and the devil is in the detail. I have put down all the evidence I could collect in police files and other records – you could study them if you are interested. It does appear that some people fabricated cases against Homi; and it is inconceivable that the Tatas had nothing to do with all this. They took a keen interest in Homi's fate, and a senior police officer reported the GM's anxiety at Homi's popularity. A case of cheating had been registered against him in the neighboring princely state of Seraikela, whose peasants had been gathering around Homi. About this case, the IGP reported the management's opinion

that "if he be convicted, labour would settle down." In addition, Homi is said to have threatened a TISCO supervisor called Kutar, whom workers believed to be an arranger of goondas.

The atmosphere at the workplace was tense and rough. Kutar reported Homi for threatening him, and a criminal case was filed against Homi. Be that as it may, in 1930, even Homi's rivals in the JLA were repeating his allegations that management were engaging rowdies to break up labour organisations.

Your book suggests the Tatas backed the persecution of Homi.

Yes, the Tatas' lawyer, Manecksha Poachkhanawalla coordinated the anti-Homi campaign. He was also advising the management about how to deal with the unions. Without question, the Tatas were interested in seeing the back of Homi.

What about Bose's meeting of 1931, which was attacked and disrupted? Were the Tatas behind it too?

By mid-1930, Homi had been convicted and disappeared from the scene. Convictions in different cases put him in prison for four years, but his jail-term was extended by another nine months. Meanwhile, the Great Depression had set in, and the workers were under severe hardship. Bose visited Jamshedpur then, a time he was making conciliatory sounds about the JLF. After all, the JLF leader was in jail, and Bose was aware of his tremendous popularity among workers, who thought him to be suffering on their behalf – which he was. Bose alleged the Tatas had put away the workmen's leader and were hand-in-glove with the British. During different phases of the national movement, Tatas would shift their political stance. In this period, their approach was distinctly pro-British. At a time of political upheaval, some directors may have felt this to be necessary in order to combat the threat of communism.

It was during this time that Bose said the "*Tatas' concern in Jamshedpur is much less national than even the textile mills of the Indian industrial magnates for whom 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' is often a convenient excuse for robbing the public*." His statement showed the distance that now existed between TISCO management and the man who had helped them settle the 1928 strike. Tatas now feared Bose was the new threat. They therefore decided to disrupt one of Bose's meetings.

I have a fair amount of evidence about this from the CID reports as well as from the personal correspondence of TISCO's General Manager J. L. Keenan and others. Keenan, in fact, made it clear that he had met that section of workers whom the police used to refer as "anti-party", which was their name for a gang known for breaking up workers' meetings.

Bose's meeting of September 20, 1931 was violently disrupted. But this time it was not one-sided. An eyewitness from those times, the activist Moni Ghosh, reported in his memoir, *Our Struggle* that 300 drunken hooligans had arrived at the maidan, determined to disrupt the meeting. He said *"everyone in Jamshedpur knew that the big officials of the Steel Company were connected with this hooliganism. One of the hirelings frankly admitted to Subhas Babu that it was the Steel Company's doing."* Subhas Bose apparently sent him to the General Manager, who took no notice. Ghosh further reports that the hooligans' lathis were met with retaliation, and that "Subhas Babu stood firm", as the fight went on for an hour. He goes on to say that *"this was perhaps the first time that the Steel Company's hirelings were injured in their attempt to break labour meetings. This gang had driven out Homi from his meetings… they had made the Federation powerless, humiliated Mangal Singh… but the table was now turned."*

Bose had no doubt as to the management's role in the affray, and explicitly warned them, in a press note issued a couple of days later. He also recounted the event in an article written in 1935, entitled *Labour in Jamshedpur*, wherein he spoke of TISCO's "ruthless policy towards workers."

Let me add here, that we are not in a court of law. We are historians. We can only go by historically relevant evidence, or rather, whatever part of it is accessible to us. This includes official and managerial archives, interviews with people who remember those events, written memoirs, and newspaper reports. We are not trying the Tatas in court. They are not up for conviction. As historians, we can only report what the evidence tells us.

And what does the evidence tell you?

The evidence tells me that the disruption of Bose's meeting was brought about by the Tata management. In my book, I have cited evidence of General Manager Keenan's involvement in the incident. For example,

the District Commissioner reported there was good reason to believe that the disruption had been arranged by Tatas' land officer SC Gupta. The police were proximate to the management and tended to see workers unrest as a communist conspiracy. From their light-hearted attitude towards the September 20 fracas, it seems they were in concert with the management and wanted to humiliate Bose. Humiliated he indeed was. As a matter of fact, I found a statement of an English officer who said, "Subhas Bose is reported to have been hit on his posterior with a lathi, but I have not been able to confirm this information yet." You can see, almost feel the glee in the officer's report. Bose was not very active thereafter, mainly because of involvement elsewhere, but he remained very angry with the Tatas for some years.

But the Tatas and Bose did patch up subsequently?

They patched up during Bose's presidentship of the Congress. In 1939, he was elected for a second term, but had to resign. Between the end of his first term and his resignation after re-election, he made conciliatory moves towards the Tatas.

At the time, the Congressman Abdul Bari, Deputy Speaker in the Assembly, was the most popular leader of workers in Bihar. In 1939, he was bitterly opposed to the centenary birth anniversary celebrations of Jamsetji Tata. In contrast, Bose was asking trade unionists to be responsible, saying that the Tatas were great industrialists, and citing their contribution to the nation. Bari, on the other hand, was saying what Bose had said eight years before – that the Tatas were exploiting patriotism to rob the public. Bose had thus changed his position once he became Congress president. Perhaps he had no option.

The Tatas were propping one labour leader after another. Yet they were not able to overcome the resistance of workers…

To understand this, we must take into account what happened after 1931. For three or four years, there was quiet in TISCO. Bose had lost his leverage with the Tatas, Homi was in jail, and workers were somehow coping with their travails themselves. Into this vacuum jumped V V Giri, who later became the President of the country. He was a railway unionist from Madras. What he did was to set up a union in Jamshedpur. It was called the Metal Workers' Union. Strangely enough, in his two-

volume memoir, Giri didn't mention this union. But it got the attention of the police. Giri had a very dubious role in Jamshedpur. The main role of the Metal Workers' Union was to keep tight control over the workers. It was closely aligned with the management.

Homi was due to be released in 1934. The TISCO management was alarmed as it was the time of the year when bonuses were paid. The management feared that Homi would take the credit for getting bonus for the workers – that he would once again muddy the waters. There is evidence that TISCO was acutely aware of the need to manipulate the standing of this or that union leader.

Your book says the Tatas conspired to keep Homi in jail…

Yes, the Tatas wanted to keep Homi in jail for as long as possible. They arranged it by seizing upon an opportunity. Homi had gone on hunger-strike in jail and they used this to indict him under Section 52 of the Prison Act which deals with "heinous offences against prison discipline". I can't see how a hunger strike may be deemed a heinous offence, but there you are.

Homi was in Seraikela jail, in a principality that bordered Jamshedpur. Sometime in April 1934, General Manager Keenan lunched with the governor of Bihar and Orissa and obtained a reassurance that the government did not favour an early release for Homi. Keenan then went ahead with a plan to get the ruler of Seraikela to reject Homi's appeal for an early release. Thereupon Homi embarked on a series of hunger-strikes, the third of which Keenan got wind of. He then leaned upon the Raja to extend Homi's jail-term by nine months under Section 52. In fairness, I should add that one of Tata Sons directors, Sir H P Mody, disapproved of the company taking "such an extreme step". But the plan was set in motion.

There is an entire report on this episode, which was sent by the local TISCO official on the spot. This official wrote to JRD Tata saying he had met the Raja of Saraikela and that the ruler "after a few minutes of whisper" (sic) with his advisors, agreed to extend the jail-term. The Raja extracted some concessions from TISCO regarding those of his Adivasi residents who worked in Jamshedpur and who might try to "stir up trouble" for him in Seraikela. You can say it was a case of judicial corruption. The Tatas had used their clout to influence the judicial

process for achieving their goals. Homi underwent a further nine months of rigorous imprisonment.

But Homi was ultimately bought over, wasn't he?

Homi was released in November 1935. Soon after, he made his peace with the Tatas. This was the time Congressman Abdul Bari was the rising star. As far as I know, Homi was the only non-communist labour leader to have undergone five years rigorous imprisonment for his work as a trade unionist. From then on, he played a conciliatory role. Maybe his spirit was broken.

What happened to Homi? Did he remain in Jamshedpur?

Homi remained and lived in his house in Jamshedpur's Mango area till the 1970s. He died there. He had a nephew whom I met during my research in the eighties. I got Homi's photo from him, but he was still scared enough to say he didn't want any acknowledgement.

So, Bari replaced Homi as the most influential leader of the TISCO workers…

Bari became the favoured trade union leader of the TISCO management through the intervention of Rajendra Prasad and later also Sardar Vallabbhai Patel. Bari was a fiery speaker. He was among the few Congress leaders to have attacked the Bombay Trades Dispute Act of 1938. But he was a loyal Congressman and very close to Rajendra Prasad. The Congress leaders prevailed over the Tatas to accept Bari. He became the accredited leader of the Tata Workers' Union.

What was the controversy over the centenary celebrations of Jamsetji's birth?

The Tata management had made workers' participation in the celebrations mandatory. They were forced to stay overtime, do marches, appear in events. They rebelled against it. In the preparation phase there was already a lot of tension. Bari was very contemptuous of the management's attempt to regiment workers. Bose came out with a public statement in patronising language regarding Bari. Mind you, both were in the Congress and Bose was the president. Bose said he was very happy to see Bari emerge as the labour leader and take so much interest in workers. However, labour leaders should be responsible and moderate and pay homage to the great Tata for setting up such a great

industry, generating wealth for the country etc. Bari being the man he was, countered that it was sad to hear Subhash babu make such statements when the Tatas were riding roughshod over the workers, that the celebration was a regimented affair. As regards the JLA, he said, it had been defunct for years "despite the best efforts of Subhash Babu". Anyway, the celebrations were boycotted after the first day.

Did the TISCO workers teach liberalism to the Tatas?

Right through the late 1920s and the 1930s, one finds that TISCO was engaged in unsavoury machinations to crush the workers' movement and refused to recognise workers' leaders. It worked with the administration to restrain or control these leaders. Their actions can't be categorised as liberal. If they learned some liberality, it was because of the severe resistance of workers. It was they who compelled TISCO to accept their leaders, as they eventually had to with Bari. I suppose, by then, the Tatas had learnt a lesson in democratic practices. The force and power of the working class movement made the Tatas aware of the need to be conciliatory.

How nationalist was the Tatas' project?

If we imbue the words *national* and *nationalism* with virtuous content, then of course it wasn't. It's the vocabulary we use that causes the confusion. Nationalism is ambiguous – it can include good as well as unsavoury elements. TISCO made use of national feelings when it was convenient, when their connection with the national leadership could be of use to them. This happened in 1924, and I have already pointed out how they got Subhas Bose to Jamshedpur in 1928. In the 1930s, however, the Tata management was closer to the colonial administration than to the nationalists.

Enterprises of this nature cannot be evaluated in ideological categories. They exist for purposes of self-expansion and negotiate their political stances along the way. Profit is the highest value, everything else is incidental. That's the truth about capitalist society, which workers get to learn in the school of industrial labour. It's a bitter experience and yields no degrees. I got my PhD researching the labour movement in Bihar, but all I can do is to salute their memory.

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JUNE 15, 2015, THE INDIAN EXPRESS

Yoga Hoga

Yoga should be popularised for its health benefits, not equated with religion and nationalism.

The ongoing controversy about yoga, in the backdrop of hyped events like the World Yoga Day, is yet another example of deceitful polemic. It began with a reminder that yoga has nothing to do with religion. Of late, however, sundry political swamis have announced that anyone who disapproves of compulsory yoga should leave the country. So now yoga is essential not only to Hinduism but to national pride. Refusal to submit to this rule is treachery. The 'Parivar' presumes to decide what is or is not 'national' and who may or may not live in India. Perhaps some energetic policemen will lodge a case of sedition against anyone refusing to perform *surya namaskar.*

This manufactured controversy exemplifies the Parivar's modus operandi. It is not wisdom that interests them, but the compulsory unification of thought and culture. As for the objections raised by certain self-appointed representatives of Indian Muslims, surely the reduction of any *aasan* to its symbolic origins is far-fetched? I have practiced yoga for over 30 years; including *surya namaskar.* At no time did I imagine myself to be worshipping the Sun God – it was simply an exercise beneficial to my health. Yoga is accepted the world over as an excellent aid to longevity. To treat it as a Hindu religious ritual is equivalent to believing that aerobics are a step towards Christianity or that acupuncture is an insignia of Chinese imperialism.

But I learned yoga of my own free choice. In this regard, the statements

issued by some Muslim groups are appropriate. It's the compulsion that is the problem. RSS representatives in government are attempting to enforce their version of Indian culture. And their behavior indicates that they treat culture as a means of political domination.

If the Parivar wished to promote Indian tradition, why did they cause AK Ramanujan's works to be dropped from Delhi University's history syllabus in 2011? Ramanujan was a world-renowned scholar who loved the Ramayana. Reading *The Three Hundred Ramayanas* can broaden most people's understanding of Indian culture. But the Parivar's representatives campaigned for its removal, even though an expert committee approved of the author's scholarship. Their student wing resorted to intimidation in the process. As Mukul Kesavan observed in an article on the controversy (The Telegraph, October 27, 2011):

> "The expert committee appointed by the Supreme Court to investigate the matter had four members, three of whom endorsed Ramanujan's essay without reservation. The fourth, while praising the essay's scholarship, came to the conclusion that it would be difficult for college lecturers to teach with sufficient context, *especially those who weren't Hindu*..."

This reasoning is typical of the RSS, which tends to conflate wisdom with cunning. Most lecturers are Hindu anyway, and surely the aim of education is to broaden our minds? No, it is plurality that alarms them. In Kesavan's words, "*Hindutva* seeks to re-make the diversity of Hindu narratives and practices into a uniform faith based on standardized texts." Standardization, uniformity and compulsion are the ideals that inform the Parivar's concept of India (an imperium); its view of the Ramayana, whose many versions it wishes to sanitise, as well as *surya namaskar*, whose health-benefits are of less significance than the expectation that Muslims might object to it. All the gestures of the RSS are assertions that they alone represent Hindus and designed to evoke adverse reactions. Such reactions can be used to tell their critics yet again, to 'go to Pakistan.'

The RSS thrives on animosity. They would have been truly upset had Muslims ***not*** objected to compulsory yoga.

Popular sovereignty has been perverted in South Asia. It refers not to the People but to the Emperor's Moustache. The people may not define their

nation – it is the Nation that defines the People. The people are seen as a biomass of zombies – *hamara maal*, as the sarsangchaalak once said. Our imperial metaphors symbolize the inner world of communalists. The RSS are no different from the maulanas they love to hate. They wish to lay down the law (and defy it when they like), flatten popular culture, and tell us all how to behave.

The Hindutva brigade should awaken from its ideological stupor. Their desire for political supremacy shines through their stupid dictats. It is not yoga that is at stake here, but the moustachios of the sarsanghchalak. We need not have them thrust upon our children at breakfast.

We will learn yoga, not to please the RSS, but for our health. Here's a suggestion for the sarsanghchalak: please read the essay you censored, by A K Ramanujan. It's available on the Net. Make it compulsory reading for your cadre! It's a brilliant celebration of Indian culture. And it's thought-provoking. Thinking is something your followers sorely need to do. Next time they do *surya namaskar* they could actually experience light.

The headline has been changed from the original published version.

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SEPTEMBER 7. 2015, CATCHNEWS.COM

The Emperor's Masks

The RSS wields a thinly veiled grip over the BJP government

It is deceitful of the RSS to compare itself to any other civil society organization other than to the National Advisory Council, which operated under the UPA government, to which they had strenuously objected. No other NGO exercises ideological control over the government and maintains a vast cadre of political activists, many of whom undergo arms training. None of them can summon government ministers for discussions.

The RSS sustains many front organisations that do its bidding. Prior to the 2014 general elections, the leader of one such front, VHP President Togadia, reminded Muslims of the violence in Gujarat and Muzaffarnagar. It is unlikely that he will be punished for hate speech. The Bajrang Dal is another front. One of its local leaders hailed the murder of Professor Kalburgi and warned of more such outrages. In fact, BJP members had participated in threatening demonstrations at Kalburgi's house. One union minister of state is accused of incitement in the Muzaffarnagar violence. Their involvement in the Vyapam scandal has been exposed by whistle-blowers who had once been its own cadre. In interviews published in February 2014, Swami Aseemanand implicated the highest RSS leadership in the Samjhauta Express terrorist attacks. Thereafter little was heard of these serious allegations. Recently the public prosecutor in the Malegaon terror case alleged that she was asked to sabotage the case.

Prima facie all these are criminal activities – why are they covered up

by elected representatives who have sworn to uphold the Constitution? Why do most of our public commentators avoid the issue of violence and intimidation, while waxing eloquent about economic reform? The RSS is obsessed with nation-worship and the conviction that its adherents are the only genuine 'patriots'. All their critics and members of specified religious groups are deemed to be 'anti-national'. This relentless demonisation of entire communities is the emotional fuel that drives the RSS. Standardization, uniformity and compulsion are the base ideals of its concept of India and Hinduism. An example of this is their campaign against the inclusion of AK Ramanujan's *The Three Hundred Ramayanas* in the Delhi University history syllabus.

In the midst of the Emergency of 1975, Sarsanghchalak M.D. Deoras wrote to Indira Gandhi stressing RSS loyalty to the government. He asserted that the RSS "*keeps itself aloof from power politics*." In 2000 Vajpayee stated that the RSS was not political – this was to support Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel's order enabling it to recruit within the ranks of the Gujarat state administration. In 2013, as its involvement in politics became crystal clear, senior RSS leader M.G. Vaidya asserted that "*no promise was ever made to the government in 1949 ahead of lifting of the ban on it that it will never enter politics*." The RSS is political, apolitical and non-political as per convenience.

The RSS was banned in February 1948, following Gandhiji's assassination. The circular issued by the Home Ministry under RSS' icon Sardar Patel mentioned the "*cult of violence sponsored and inspired by the activities of the Sangh*". It spoke of its indulgence in arson, robbery, dacoity and murder and the collection of illicit arms and ammunition; "*activities (that) have been carried on under a cloak of secrecy*". The ban order was lifted in July 1949; after discussions between Patel and Golwalkar, in which it was understood that the RSS would "*restrict itself to the cultural sphere, abjure violence and secrecy, be loyal to the Constitution and provide for a democratic organization*."

The RSS' activities over the decades demonstrate scant respect for this agreement. Here is a list of judicial commissions of inquiry regarding major communal carnages: Jagmohan Reddy Commission (Ahmedabad, 1969); D.P. Madon Commission (Bhiwandi, Jalgaon and Mahad, 1970); Joseph Vithayathil Commission (Tellicherry, 1971); Jitendra Narain Commission (Jamshedpur, 1979); Venugopal Commission (Kanyakumari, 1982); B.N.

Srikrishna Commission (Mumbai, 1992-93). Two threads run through all these reports: one, the criminal role of Hindutva organisations in masterminding the violence; two, the partisan conduct of the police. Why do our elite condemn the violence of Maoists and Islamists, but condone the violence of the 'Parivar'?

Violence is the deadliest epidemic of our time, yet the one most evaded. How does the BJP/RSS discuss this issue? They *deliberately evade the act of murder.* After a perfunctory condemnation of Kalburgi's murder, for example, their spokespersons keep their focus on the Sangh's grievance against the *victim*. It is almost as if they know the motives of the murderers. This is strange, given their claim that they have no connection with the criminals. The same may be said for protests against this or that film, book and cartoon. For those of us who are more offended by murder than by controversial ideas or cartoons, the crucial question is: *Why do you always change the subject? Why do you justify political assassination?*

Patriotism is often used to cover up evil deeds. Is it patriotism to murder elderly scholars and boast about it? The RSS worships not Divinity but power – its nationalism is a form of atheism. A standardized version of Hindu culture is being mixed with perpetual communal hatred to create an army of foot soldiers. Democracy is being manipulated to install a local version of the rule of the Ayatollahs. If the Sangh Parivar loves India so much, they should cease the destruction of our institutions of justice and knowledge. If they admire Hindu civilisation, they should refrain from confusing *pragnya* with propaganda, wisdom with cunning. A political project shaped around the ideal of historical revenge and the humiliation of your fellow citizens is a recipe for perpetual strife.

The RSS has emerged as an extra-constitutional authority. Did Modi tell his voters in 2014 that he would give the RSS informal entry into the Government of India? Its political influence is a portent of the creeping dissolution of state authority, similar to what has taken place in Pakistan, where state-enabled fanatics now hold sway over the state. Its cultural politics will produce a worsening stink as the months and years roll by. Justice, harmony, probity and even politeness in ordinary speech will be thrown into the cesspit of communal politics. Fanatics are equally dangerous, whether they fly the flag of Islam or of Hindutva. Bureaucrats, judicial and police officers should remember that they are servants of the Constitution and not of the government of the day. The foul language and

crimes unfolding before us are a warning. Only an alert citizenry can stop these unscrupulous ideologues from destroying the democratic institutions of the Indian Union.

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NOVEMBER 22, 2015, ESSAY PUBLISHED IN PERSONAL BLOG

In Naxalbari, forty-eight years later

On November 6, 2015, I visited Naxalbari along with my old comrades, Rabindra Ray (Lalloo), who retired from the Delhi School of Sociology in 2013, and Achintya Barua, (Monju), proprietor of Wild Grass, a tourist resort at the wild life sanctuary in Kaziranga, Assam. Rabindra's book, The Naxalites and their ideology, was one of the first to be written by an actual participant. We had planned this trip for two years and were happy that it finally materialised. All three of us, along with many other students from Delhi University (most of us from St Stephen's College) had joined the Naxalite movement and gone underground in 1970-1971.

It took us some time to locate Kanu Sanyal's erstwhile home in Sephtulajote village, Naxalbari, which has been converted into a memorial by his party, CPI (ML) Kanu Sanyal. The village (about 15 km from Bagdogra airport) is a short distance from the main road, and everyone we asked knew whom we were talking about. The path was barely motorable, and what we saw when we arrived was a small, thatched building with mud floors and a little courtyard with goats and chickens roaming about. Comrade Subrata welcomed us and we sat for a while, sipping tea, meeting other old associates of Kanu – some of whom are visible in the photographs below – explaining who we were and why we had come so far to visit Naxalbari. (Naxalbari is a cluster of villages, there seems to be no police or railway station bearing that name).

Kanu was the original 'Naxalite', who led a movement of agrarian poor in North Bengal in 1966-67. In April 1967, the Siliguri subdivision in Darjeeling was witness to seizures of land and food grain along with attacks on the landed rich. Land revenue minister Harekrishna Konar tried to placate his ultra-left comrades, but his efforts were futile. On May 24, a police platoon was attacked by several hundred peasants. Inspector Sonam Wangdi was hit by two arrows and died that night. On May 25, the police fired at hostile crowds near Khoribari police station. Ten people, mostly women and children were killed. The Naxalite movement had begun and was hailed by China as 'Spring Thunder Over India.'

The CPI(M-L) was inaugurated in 1969. More about the Maoist insurrection in India may be read in my article Permanent Spring, a contribution to Seminar, March 2010. Those interested could also read my novel, Revolution Highway, published in 2010; which has also appeared in Hindi: 'रिवोल्यूशन हाइवे' ka Hindi sanskaran.

This was a nostalgic trip to commemorate our friendship which has lasted half a century and was sealed in revolutionary times. Our ideas about Naxalism have changed, but the friendship remains along with an indescribable aspiration to human liberation. I cannot speak for others, but my own views have been expressed publicly, over many years. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the rebels were motivated by a powerful urge to resist the entrenched system of vested interests who dominated the Indian polity, and still do. If Indian Maoism still exists; and indeed, forces the ruling class to declare it a major security threat, our rulers need to ask themselves how, after seven decades of sovereign power, large areas of the countryside have remained outside the structure of governance, to the point where they could become zones of military insurrection. The central issue has never been poverty and the lack of so-called 'development'. It has been and remains, the failure of justice, the treatment of millions of Indians as if they were less than human, expendable bio-matter in the machinery of 'national progress'.

But this is not the place for an analysis of Naxalism. I post these few photographs especially for my dear friends and old comrades. It's been a long time. Some of us are no longer among the living. Arvind Das, who initiated me into Marxism, died – too young – in 2000. So also did Devapriya (Rana) Sen, in 1985. Ajit Pal, 'Palda' passed away in 2007. Some lost their lives in the bloody events of 1970-72. Comrade Bishen of

Birla Cotton Mills, Delhi, is also no more – here is a poem I wrote in his memory: Salaam comrade

The three of us remembered all of you – at ground zero. Lal salaam!

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FEBRUARY 22, 2016, BLOG ESSAY

What is to be Undone

An extended comment on the events and disturbances in JNU, during February 2016

> *"Remember your humanity and rebel!"*
> – Slogan on the walls of Paris, May 1968
>
> *"Indignation is a bad counselor"*
> – Leo Strauss, 1953
>
> *"What you run away from runs after you"*
> – Romanian proverb

The above comments engage with the issues raised in the current debate about justice and nationalism. The agitation was sparked off by an event in JNU highlighting the plight of the Kashmiri people. I will begin with two names and a question which (to my mind) are as significant as the grievances of Kashmiris and non-Kashmiris about the Indian justice system. The two names are Mohammad Maqbool Sherwani (aged 19, died 1947); and Ravindra Mhatre (aged 48, died 1984). The question concerns the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their homes in the Valley. Why are they not a part of left-wing concerns about Kashmir? Sympathizers of Maoist revolutionary politics may consider four names – Francis Induwar (died 2009), Kenduka Arjun, (died 2010), Lucas Tete (died 2010) and Niyamat Ansari (died 2011). What happened to them and why did they die? These

names and the question signify an experience of injustice. For that reason alone, they deserve the attention of the defenders of democracy. Now, let us take a look at what is happening in Delhi

Police protection, Delhi version

The most striking image of the times we inhabit is the photograph of a young accused being brutally assaulted in the premises of a prominent court in New Delhi. He was in the custody of the police, hence under the indirect protection of the court. His assailants were lawyers, who have bragged about their deeds, and are known for their proximity to senior leaders of the BJP. Most of them have not been charged for what is a clear offence under the IPC Sec 325. Spokespersons of the ruling party routinely deploy the platitude that the law will take its course. Typical of its behaviour in matters such as the murder of Professor Kalburgi, they make a perfunctory disapproval of hooliganism, and then produce belligerent justifications for their violence. None of them show the slightest remorse or compunction for what even a village constable would recognise as a criminal offence.

We are being intimidated in broad daylight by persons who do not care a whit for reasoned speech – let alone the law. All we hear these days is a reminder of the heavy price we shall pay for opposing Modi, the Sangh and their 'development agenda'. The Delhi police operates under the Union Government, and was responsible for the raids on the JNU campus as well as the acts in the court premises. Some of its decisions have now been shown to have been taken on doctored evidence. The National Human Rights Commission has declared the assault on student leader Kanhaiya Kumar to have been planned. The Home Minister's utterances were akin to those of a con artist, so we need not be surprised by the response of his followers. We may also assume that these acts have the approval of the Union Cabinet, and that we are now under the grip of a government that has no respect for the rule of law.

The situation will worsen because the private army that controls the government is bent upon revising the foundational statutes of the Indian Republic. It also adheres to an ideology that justifies violence in the name of patriotism. Violent attacks, disruptions and dire threats by Hindutva-oriented vigilantes and legislators are occurring daily across India. The

ruling party has shown itself to be no different from the Maoists whom it routinely condemns. But whereas the Maoists have proven incapable of capturing state power, the Hindutva ideologues believe they have done so. Let us see if the Indian public will endorse this belief.

This is serious enough to bear repeating: The Government of India is enabling, condoning and encouraging vigilante violence and hooliganism. Controlled mobs now operate under state protection.

'Anti -nationalism' etc

Most of the slogans heard on the JNU campus expressed unobjectionable left-wing and feminist demands. However, there were some that spoke of a long war for the break-up of the country. There were other calls that could be confusing to anyone not familiar with the term "oppressed nationalities" which has been part of communist vocabulary since 1917. So, the current political agitation marks the intersection of many controversial themes, ranging from definitions of the nation to constitutional and legal matters.

Some bare facts need recapitulation. Some students attracted to Maoism and including those who believe in 'self-determination' for Kashmir, and were agitated over the execution of Afzal Guru, held an event to commemorate the latter. Denied permission due to objections from one student group, they used the good offices of the union, whose president belongs to the AISF, student wing of the moderate wing of the communist movement, the CPI. This is the party of the late Satyapal Dang, one of India's staunchest secularists and fighters against terrorism in Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s. (I wonder if our Home Minister has heard of him). As the event unfolded, some began shouting belligerent slogans – let us leave aside the question of who started it. As often happens, when ideologues wish to hurt each other by methods short of physical assault, they say things designed to cause maximum emotional pain. Both sides – the ultra-nationalists and those rooting for 'self-determination' proceeded to do this. Some persons alleged to be outsiders also shouted the objectionable slogans referred to above.

The ultra-nationalists used their contacts in the central government to facilitate police intervention. Some of them now regret the consequences of what has ballooned into a nasty confrontation. I appreciate the fact that the three ABVP office-bearers who resigned from their posts disagreed

with the habit of painting all left-wing students with the same brush. Similarly, all people who object to slogans calling for the break-up of India also cannot be painted with the same brush. I too object to such a slogan – although I don't think it calls for police action unless there is a direct incitement to violence. We know many people calling for and indulging in violence who seem to have no fear of police action.

Something similar took place at the Delhi Press Club, where persons who stand for Kashmiri self-determination used the good offices of a lecturer who booked the venue for them, but who does not share their political vision. He is now been targeted – along with three other retired teachers from Delhi University – for collusion with so-called anti-national elements.

In both cases, persons of democratic persuasion were used to facilitate expressions of extreme beliefs. As far as I can tell, they had no idea of what was about to transpire, and their own statements at these gatherings were attempts at lowering the pitch and calming the atmosphere. A kind of verbal 'guerilla action' was undertaken by some radical activists who – it would appear – were unconcerned with the repercussions. They did not care that people who do not support their politics but helped them because of their commitment to free expression, would be paying the price.

To use well-meaning people for your purpose via subterfuge can bear terrible consequences. It is unfair to those well-meaning people and typifies the belief that the end justifies the means. Some of us are so consumed by anger that we feel justified in doing this, but it is not an ethical course of action, and brings our politics into disrepute. It is similar to what happened in Kandhamal in 2007, when the Maoist party murdered the VHP's Swami Laxmanananda and left the common people to face the communal violence unleashed by the Sanghis, who blamed 'the Christians' for the murder. In the spiral of violence unfolding in so-called insurgent districts, the state utilises the opportunity provided to it by extremists to suppress opposition from all quarters. It targets all democratic protest for being anti-national, seditious, etc. This is what is happening now in India's capital. Unscrupulous TV anchors are adding fuel to the fires of 'patriotic' indignation – some of them behaving as flag-bearers for a hysterical version of nationalism. As a Supreme Court bench observed recently, "moderation is a forgotten word today in all spheres of life".

Self-determination and violence

There is also the tangled issue of 'self-determination', a term many people use as if it were an axiom. It is not. The idea of democracy is linked to the concept of identity. 'Demos' is the term for '*the people*' in 'the rule of the people'. The slogan of 'self-determination' carries the implicit presupposition that we know who "the people" are before we speak of their right to 'self-determination'. Ideologically defined boundaries of the 'self' are presupposed in the practice of democracy. This issue is related to the birth of the nation-state and the notion of sovereignty. Let me add here that the multiplication of sovereignties is not a solution to the violation of human rights, nor should it be conflated unquestioningly with the concept of democracy. In some cases, it may worsen the situation.

Identity is a matter of power, interests and definition. For example, the slogan that Kashmiris have a right to self-determination implies that the identity of Kashmiris is self-evident. The moment the identity of Kashmiri Pandits and Sikhs, Ladakh's Buddhists and Jammu's Dogras, Gujars and Bakerwals, is brought into the argument, the presumptive nature of unilateral definitions becomes evident. Who is included in, and who is excluded from the 'self', and why? Is it all very clear to us, or does it deserve a discussion?

Given that this agitation has highlighted the plight of the Kashmiri people, let us examine some facts that tend to get left of out of leftist concerns. Some amongst us remain aggrieved by the execution of Maqbool Butt on February 11, 1984. They need to remember the kidnapping and murder of the Indian consular official Ravindra Mhatre, in Birmingham, on February 6 the same year. It does not behoove a state to make vengeful decisions, but it does not help matters if we forget significant facts. We may also mention in passing the names of BJP politician Tikka Lal Taploo, Judge NK Ganjoo (who had tried Maqbool Butt); and journalist, PN Bhat – all three murdered in late 1989 by 'warriors' of Kashmiri self-determination.

I have often reiterated my belief that the question of violence is – or should be – the crux of political debate. Militarism has emerged as the ground shared by enemies. The militarist appropriation of martyrdom is a deeply patriarchal gesture. Violence is a never-ending spiral. The best metaphor for violence is a black hole – the place that swallows up everything in its vicinity. Once again, therefore, I will remind all ardent

supporters of political causes that violence feeds on itself. Apart from their other numerous 'actions', the Maoists murdered two policemen who were in their custody, both tribals – Francis Induwar (beheaded in 2009) and Lucas Tete (shot in 2010). Kenduka Arjun, secretary of the Chasi Muliya Adivasi Sangh in Orissa, was murdered by Maoists in 2010. They also beat to death Niyamat Ansari, a NREGA activist, in front of his family in 2011. I will not go into the implications of the derailment of the Jnaneswari Express in 2010, which cost 148 lives.

On communal issues, let us remember Taslima Nasrin, the author who defended religious minorities in Bangladesh, and was hounded out of Kolkata in 2007 by fanatics who browbeat the Left Front government. Perpetually under threat, she finally had to leave India. On the price paid for dissent, let us remember TP Chandrashekharan, a dissident CPI (M) leader in Kerala murdered in 2012 for setting up an alternative left group. A week ago, on February 15, an RSS cadre named Sujith was murdered inside his house in front of his parents. The accused in both these cases belong to the CPI (M). There are many more examples, cutting across party lines. Whatever we might think of our political opponents, do not such actions undermine democracy? Do they not indicate that we live in a dangerously authoritarian culture?

As regards Afzal Guru, like many others, I too felt that the trial process and submission of evidence raised several disturbing questions; that life imprisonment would have been a fairer sentence, and that he should not have been executed. I was severely perturbed by the phrase 'collective conscience of the nation' appearing in a court judgment sentencing a man to death. I wrote about this well before the judgment, and about the death sentence, which I oppose in principle, whether it is handed out by judges or revolutionaries, *sanghis* or *jehadis*. People have every right to criticise judgments without being accused of contempt – have not the ultra-nationalists also criticised judgments they did not like? Such criticism should be couched in temperate language, but we remain within our rights to voice it.

The Pandit issue

Going on from this, doesn't the plight of Kashmir's Pandits also deserve consideration in a debate about Kashmir? At the time of their enforced

exodus from the Valley, concerns were expressed by some human rights activists and leftists. On the whole however, the so-named 'left and democratic' bloc has remained silent. I do not believe the 'Jagmohan did it' theory on this, although I am aware of Jagmohan's role in Sanjay Gandhi's slum-clearing activism during the Emergency. A great deal of evidence has been supplied by those who experienced the exodus – evidence that needs serious debate, not outright rejection. All Kashmiri Muslims cannot be blamed for the plight of the Pandits, nor for desiring their exodus. But neither are all Hindus, supporters of Hindutva. Acknowledgement of injustice is the first and essential step towards reconciliation – this is as true for the Valley's Pandit population as it is for its Muslims. Activists for human rights should also note the presence of large number of migrant labour in the Valley – many of whom have been victims of terrorist acts.

Be that as it may, conflicting views on what caused the Pandits to depart need an airing, not silence. Why have the victims of the largest (the number could be three lakhs) communally-driven migration in independent India's history been the target of barely-concealed animus from leftists? Kashmiri's have undergone terrible suffering ever since militancy began, and they include Pandits as well as Muslims, residents of the Jammu region as well as those of the Kashmir Valley; Kashmiri speaking people as well as others.

Apologists for the status quo ask us to stop talking about caste-based discrimination – as if it will go away by pretending it does not exist. The same attitude has been exhibited by many of us in regard to Kashmiri Pandits – as if we can get rid of a mountain of pain and injustice by looking the other way. If we stand for giving voice to suffering humanity, we must stand for all the victims of oppression in the Valley, regardless of their faith. If we stand for free expression and dissent, we must ask why the Pandits have been treated with indifference and worse, by leftists (given some honourable exceptions). Failure to conjoin the plight of the Pandits with all other victims of insurgency and state repression is a betrayal of our humanity and weakens our political integrity. Furthermore, it drives victims to other kinds of extremism, or to cynicism and despair. Why should we abandon good causes to bad politicians?

Defending democracy and the constitution

Indian politics has entered a phase of extreme danger – from the standpoint of the laboring citizens who need democracy the most. It is disturbing to see a section of India's ruling class seeking to bypass and undermine constitutional rule by validating a politics of hatred and intimidation. 'Hindu Rashtra' and 'Akhand Hindustan' are mutually contradictory ideals: if you want one, you will automatically rule out the other. The relentless tirade against Muslims, Christians and Communists by the Sangh Parivar will produce the contrary of what they wish for (or say they do). The theories of Savarkar, Hedgewar and Golwalkar are recipes for India's disintegration. Extremism feeds on itself by appearing in different forms.

Whatever be its flaws, the Indian Constitution is the best consensual statute upon which to base a defence of democracy. Revolutionaries should consider the possibility that a section of the Indian ruling class is already bent upon doing away with democracy. So rather than a violent revolution to overthrow the constitution, we need a non-violent mass awakening to defend and implement it. But that will require serious re-thinking on socialist politics. Since the ongoing student movement is committed to defending the freedom of thought, there should be no problem with this.

The current student movement in JNU has received welcome support from students and academics all over India and the world, in addition to the support of many political parties. It can make a difference to Indian politics, but politics is too important to be left to specialists of revolution. Authoritarianism and hatred of dissent may be witnessed across the political spectrum – right, left and 'marketist'. It would be best if students made up their own minds about political issues and inaugurated an open dialogue with society. Incidentally, the term 'revolution' means the completion of a circle. If you want transformation, close the circle and get out of it. The only answer to extremism is moderation, truthful speech and non-violence. Jai Ho.

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OUTLOOK, AUGUST 21, 2017

The Decline of Idealism

Before discussing the idealism of the Left, it would be a good idea to think about what we mean by these terms. Let us start with the second one – is there any such thing as 'the Left'? If the term refers to a political monolith, clearly the answer is no. The international communist monolith broke up decades ago and today even the fragments are fragmented. The Naxalite movement began with an attempt to build a party, its proponents were squabbling bitterly even prior to the birth of the CPI (ML); and the claimants to the ultra-left tradition in India number in the scores.

As to the first term, idealism in its philosophical sense means either that reality is mental (that the world is a construction of the mind); or that reality is permeated by structures of thought, and so all truth is an individual perspective. In everyday usage, idealism refers to forming and/or pursuing ideals; and it can be combined with a sense of impracticality, as in 'starry-eyed idealist'. There was indeed a time when philosophical idealism was connected to idealism in the popular sense of progressive and optimistic social thought. The problem today is that if idealism implies a commit-ment to principle, we are obliged to ask – which principle? And if it refers to progressive optimism, again, what is meant by these terms? If it's a question of nobility, how may we judge what is noble? These questions cannot be answered with any certainty, yet they remain a major concern for us.

The term 'Left' originated with the French Revolution. Over the past two centuries it came broadly to signify the political expression of the 'social question' – the aspirations and demands of the repressed and oppressed sections of society, more specifically the labouring classes. It was coterminous with social democracy (also known as socialism), a movement cum argument that democracy needed to be extended from the political to the economic sphere; that daily life needed to be democratised. These terms became unbearably complicated in the twentieth century. The concept of the repressed crossed economic definitions and came to incorporate national and social aspirations. Since such aspirations could (and often did) take authoritarian forms as well, political language became burdened with complexity. The most glaring example of this complexity is the fact that Nazism was an outgrowth of the German Workers Party, later renamed the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Yet Nazism was the deadly enemy of workers and of socialism. Suffice it to say that the twisted history of socialism has caused immense confusion.

What else does the term Left signify? 'The Left' and 'socialism' are not reducible to communist doctrines or the history of Russia, China or Cuba. These terms also refer to movements of the labouring poor and resistance to oppression. Considered this way, there is no sign that popular movements have receded. Other countries aside, in India agitations by industrial workers, students , indebted peasants (nowadays renamed 'farmers'), fisher-folk, tribal people resisting corporate mining enterprises and villagers opposed to nuclear plants have intensified over the past three years. Recently 134 truckers unions in Punjab involving 93000 truckers went on strike. IT professionals in Tamil Nadu have formed a union to resist job losses and improve working conditions. There have been protests by traders against demonetisation and GST, by conscience-stricken middle-class people against communal violence. The list is long, though much of it is unreported.

Social unrest of this scale is the expression of an incipient social democracy. Moreover these movements undoubtedly involve the passionate energies of humble activists, ordinary persons who are angry enough at injustice and idealistic enough to fight for it. Judging from the numerous RTI activists killed, and the scale of ongoing struggles, it seems meaningless to suggest that there is a decline of idealism in the left. So what are we talking about?

The problem arises out of the over-running of idealism by ideology. It is rendered more complex by confusion about the role of popularity in democratic politics; and the question whether populist ideologies are 'left' or 'right'. Then again, ultra-nationalist cadre and members of vigilante groups might be just as inspired by ideals as activists on the Left. How may we understand what is going on?

We live in an age wherein credibility, the production of doctored images and manufactured consent matter more than truth or falsehood. Ideology is a mixture of fact and sentiment, operating like a religion in an age when belief has been undermined by science. Ideological convictions undermine intelligible speech – this is the clue to the decline of conversation and its replacement by polemic and slander. In such a situation, all that remains of idealism is the conviction that we are right no matter what is said, that anyone who believes otherwise is an evil person and needs to be crushed. Words like empathy, decency and kindness, that never had a place in ideological doctrines anyway, mean even less in ordinary political debates nowadays. This might seem a sweeping statement, but can we remember the last time any political spokespersons displayed the slightest compassion for the numerous victims of mob violence?

Whatever the authors of grand political projects might think, human beings have always possessed empathy and the capacity for disinterested friendship. These traits are as natural and timeless as erotic attraction and parental love. It is precisely these fundamental aspects of our character that are threatened by the ideological nihilism at work in contemporary society. This nihilism can prompt us to glorify cruelty, prevent us from empathising with people in pain, and convert speech into a torrent of abuse.

It is this habit of thoughtless talk, blind faith and replacement of speech by sneering that has undermined the idealism of democratic activists and eroded their capacity to communicate with those whom they claim to represent. It is not pragmatism and opportunism that are the greatest dangers today – these tendencies are still predictable in their functions and manifestations. More sinister is the subjugation of conscience by ideology, where even monstrous crimes and terrible suffering prompt us not towards reconciliation but to an ever widening polemical spiral. On the one side we have communally-inspired vigilantes,

trained from an early age to hate certain designated 'enemies'- of the Nation, Ummah etc. Their motivations can only be described as pathological. Their leaders, whether idealist or merely unscrupulous, rely upon their cadre to perform heinous acts in the illusion that they are foot-soldiers in a holy war. On the other side are numbers of left-wing cadre, nourished on the dogma that 'the Party is always right'; who insist they possess a cosmically ordained knowledge of the 'laws of History'. The trouble of course, is that the sheer number of 'scientists of History' devalues their claims to absolute knowledge.

Nation-worship is the atheism of the Right; Party-worship the deism of the Left. In between are millions of people under pressure to ally themselves with one extreme or another, as if even the wish to avoid ideological affiliation were an act of treason. It is not that idealism has died. It has mutated into ideology, a ghastly caricature of everything attractive about human commitment – friendship, love, loyalty and steadfastness.

The rhetoric of justification: Since our focus is on the Left, I suggest a small thought experiment. Recall the human rights record in regimes where communists obtained supreme power. Those familiar with the history of the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China might include for consideration the persecution and/or deportation of Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn, the show trials, the judicial murder of Bukharin, the mass executions and purges of the 1930's, (all in the USSR); and the mass deaths during the state-induced famine of 1958-62 and the Great Leap Forward in China. We could also recall the hooliganism of the Red Guards unleashed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-69); and the 1989 massacre at Tien An Men. We could cast a look at the recently achieved judicial murder of Liu Xiaobo, a man who always advocated non-violence and whose 'crime' was to demand that the state fulfil the democratic provisions of the Chinese Constitution. The Party continues to abuse him even in death, and persecute his widow.

Closer to home, let us recall the burning alive of 22 EFR jawans in their tents by Maoists in 2010, the deaths of 148 passengers of the derailed Jnaneswari Express (also in 2010), their murder of Niyamat Ansari in 2011; and of TP Chandrasekharan by CPI (M) cadre in 2012. What would be the reaction of the comrades of various persuasions to all these facts? Would they recognise serious problems in the communist attitude to justice and the freedom of thought, or would they produce doctrinal justifications

coupled with character assassination of the victims? I believe that at best such questions might elicit embarrassed reactions such as “but look at the tremendous historical progress achieved”; “you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs” etc. This thought experiment is speculative, but it is also based on experience.

Communists have a repertoire of rhetorical justifications for the cruelties they commit; and – as is true with any faith-based tradition – they pass on their dogma across the generations. This is as true today as it was in the 1930’s or 1960’s. Leftists – and by that I mean ordinary activists – can maintain their idealism by holding fast to truthful speech, compassion and empathy. Or else they will drown in the sea of polemic which has overtaken the collective mind.

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The Supreme Court, Gandhi and the RSS

Historical controversies cannot be adjudicated in a court of law. They must be left to the arena of public debate

> "Oh, what a tangled web we weave,
> when first we practice to deceive..."
> – Sir Walter Scott

The Supreme Court recently took up a PIL challenging a statement made by Rahul Gandhi alleging that the RSS killed Mahatma Gandhi. (Rahul Gandhi was then reported to have amended his statement, and the RSS demanded an apology. A comment sent to me by a friend indicates that Rahul Gandhi did not amend his statement although the media tried to present it as such. It appears that he had said "RSS people" killed Gandhi and he stuck to that statement throughout. It seems the SC assumed that he had held the RSS collectively responsible. It asked him to apologise. When the Court record showed the original statement to be different, the SC backtracked. By then the media had taken off with its sensationalism).

With due respect, I think the Court erred in admitting this PIL. Was it a cognisable offence for Narendra Modi in 2014 to have held the Congress responsible for the partition of India? Historical debates are not matters for courts to decide. Nor is the so-called Sangh Parivar facing a criminal trial. The trial is taking place in the minds of the people of India – and the world. We will never have forensic evidence of such crimes. Hitler never left a paper trail for the Holocaust but is there any doubt as to his responsibility

for it? These matters must be left to public debate. Some may prefer to make sweeping accusations; but thoughtful persons need to reflect on the likelihood of these accusations. We can weigh the circumstantial evidence, and come to our own conclusions, but historical debates cannot be adjudicated in court.

Let us begin with the latest interventions to the debate on what the SC calls 'collective denunciation'. The BJP has asked whether the Congress Vice President would accept the allegation that the grand old party was involved in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. "*If Rahul Gandhi's logic is taken to a logical conclusion, then can we say that the Congress is responsible for the massacre of Sikhs in this country? In 1984, we are aware that Congress leaders were involved in massacre of Sikhs. But if we say that the Congress was responsible and it was a part of the Congress' conspiracy, will Rahul Gandhi accept this?*" said BJP leader Sudesh Verma.

(Perhaps the spokesman didn't realise that his comparison of the hooligans of 1984 with Godse and his co-conspirators is an admission that the latter were indeed part of the 'Sangh Parivar'. It's also a thinly disguised gesture of complicity.) It is typical of Indian ideologues to reduce all serious matters to a partisan dimension. All of us are not campfollowers of a party. *The short answer to this question is **yes**, the Congress was indeed responsible for the 1984 carnage*. Not only by virtue of the principle of command responsibility, but by virtue of the involvement of top leaders, and acts of omission and dereliction of duty. If there is any room for doubt as regards the question of 'conspiracy' or deliberate policy, this can and should be debated; and there are many pieces of evidence that indicate that the national political leadership allowed the carnage to take place.

Is it a secret that the BJP has harped on and on about Congress responsibility ever since 1984?

Howsoever, we understand the creeping criminalisation of the Indian political system, would it not be sheer idiocy to assume that that the decisions that result in massacres and assassinations are recorded in forensic evidence prior to their being carried out? Is it not a well-known fact that whereas lesser functionaries may get caught (and they often do their work with the assurance of being protected) – the criminals at higher levels are rarely even indicted, let alone punished? And is it not true that in the aftermath both of the violence in 1984 and 2002, (not to mention a host of other incidents) the criminal justice system was grievously compromised

in matters of the registration of FIRs, the recording of evidence and the decision to prosecute persons holding executive authority in the state?

On the matter of the PIL, here are some of the Supreme Courts' reported observations: "*To say Godse killed Gandhi is one thing but to say RSS killed Gandhi is different…you have gone way ahead in making the statement…you cannot make collective denunciation*," said the bench… (it) said freedom of speech is not crippled by upholding the validity of the criminal defamation law, but it had to be ensured that there is no anarchy. "*We have upheld the defamation law. The purpose of the law is to obey law so that there is harmony rather than anarchy…your freedom is not crippled or cut. Everyday a writer, a politician will say something and you must have great magnitude to swallow. The purpose of the law is not to turn people into litigants. Purpose of law is that people obey law. Peace and harmony should prevail rather than chaos*," the bench said.

The bench also asked (RG's lawyer) Raval to show how Rahul's statement served any public good and how it was not a matter of trial since his act was immune under the law on criminal defamation. "*History is the greatest enemy of privacy. Over the years, attempts have been made to enter the lives of historically eminent personalities to give a new dimension… criticism of government is one thing and criticism of a historical figure is another thing. Your statement has to meet the test of public good*," said the bench.

Some of these observations are unexceptionable. But are these standards symmetrically applied? Collective denunciation is exemplified by epithets such as '*Babar ki aulaad*'. Defamation is also involved in the frequently aired allegation that Nehru was responsible for the death of SP Mukherjee. During the 2014 electoral campaign, Narendra Modi attacked the Congress for the 'sin of partitioning India'. Was this not collective denunciation?

The RSS is now taking umbrage at being accused of Gandhi's assassination. Why so?

Is our memory so short that we have forgotten how its votaries were speaking just two years ago? In 2014, many members of the Hindutva family (some in the BJP/ RSS) in sheer joy at the BJP's electoral victory let the cat out of the bag by deifying Godse. In fact, its Kerala mouthpiece carried an article wishing that Godse had killed Nehru. Here are links to some of their statements:

Sakshi Maharaj reveals the BJP's long standing tie to Nathuram Godse
Godse should have killed Nehru, says Kesari edit
Hindu Mahasabha head speaks to FP: Godse was a 'martyr' and 'patriot'
Hindu Mahasabha to build Godse's temple
Site identified in Lucknow for Godse temple: Hindu outfit ...
Hindu Mahasabha performs 'Bhumi pujan' for Godse temple ...
Nathuram Godse Temple | The Indian Express

And when it comes to objectionable utterances, are there not innumerable statements by persons associated with the 'parivar' (and others) that do not 'meet the test of public good'? A recent article cites some historians on this matter, their view being that the RSS did not kill Gandhi but created an ideology against him. The certitude with which they make this claim is in my view, unhistorical. The article also cites the RSS efforts to cleanse itself of this long-standing accusation. The 'Sangh Parivar' has never been sure of what public stance to take on Mahatma Gandhi. Amongst their own flock, they are vitriolic, but in deference to the global admiration of the man, they want to 'claim' him – if even as a symbol for the Swachh Bharat campaign.

As for their attitude towards historical truth, here are details regarding the Parivar's attempt to censor Gandhi's collected works under the first NDA government (1998): Brazen attempt to 'revise' Gandhi's Collected Works. Hundreds of deletions and changes were noticed by scholars and Gandhians in India and around the world, who viewed them as an insult to scholarship, and demanded an end to attempts to play with historical documents. Tridip Suhrud, director of Sabarmati Ashram, wrote a detailed analysis of this shameless behaviour in EPW in November 2004. It was only after the defeat of the NDA that the fraudulently 'revised' edition was withdrawn in 2005.

Historians are not judges in a court of law. Nor is the so-called Sangh Parivar on trial, save in the minds of the people of India – and the world, for that matter, because Gandhi remains a popular figure the world over. (A BBC poll in 2000 put Gandhi at the most popular man in the millenium – not once but twice, and that too before Leonardo da Vinci and Jesus Christ). It's a battle of the spirit that is unfolding. The courts are not the proper place for these issues. They should be left to public debate, as should the historical assessment of say, the partition of Palestine; Irish republicanism, the Stalinist era; or the policies of Mao Zedong.

Criminal deeds are not planned nor minuted in formal meetings – the very idea of committing a crime entails (most of the time) a desire to get away with it. Since the RSS is not under trial, and we have no way of either punishing the organisation (if it were to be found guilty) nor compensating it for the bad press they have received (if it was not), we are left with historical judgement, that is all. Such judgements can serve only the purpose of sharpening public awareness. People are free to debate, criticise and reject them. It all depends on memory, available evidence and methods of reasoning.

It will never be settled in court.

As for the evidence available, here is an extract from a CID source report dated December 27, 1947 of a secret meeting of RSS members in Delhi on December 8, 1947, addressed by 'Guruji' Golwalkar. Golwalkar is quoted as saying: "*The Sangh will not rest until it had finished Pakistan. If anyone stood in our way we will have to finish him too, whether it was Nehru government or any other government. The Sangh could not be won over. They should carry on their work. Referring to Muslims he said that no power on earth could keep them in Hindusthan. They shall have to quit this country. Mahatma Gandhi wanted to keep the Muslims in India so that the Congress (may) profit by their votes at the time of election. But, by that time, not a single Muslim will be left in India. If they were made to stay here, the responsibility would be Government's, and the Hindu community would not be responsible. Mahatma Gandhi could not mislead them any longer. We have the means whereby such men can be immediately silenced, but it is our tradition not to be inimical to Hindus. If we are compelled, we will have to resort to that course also*." (See Bharat Bhushan – RSS chief Golwalkar threatened to kill Gandhi – 1947 CID report)

Six weeks after this sinister meeting, there took place the January 20 Gandhi murder attempt.

And ten days after that, Gandhi was shot dead.

The RSS is fond of citing Patel in contraposition to Nehru. Now whereas in his February 27, 1948 letter to Nehru (vol 6 of Selected Correspondence, edited by Durga Das) Patel exonerated the RSS, he also held that "*it was a fanatical wing of the Hindu Mahasabha directly under Savarkar that hatched the conspiracy and saw it through*" (p 56). If Patel was correct in his assessment of the RSS, will they concede that he was correct in his belief in the guilt of their hero V D Savarkar? Or do they wish to have their cake and

eat it too? (Incidentally, Justice Jeevan Lal Kapur's opinion, expressed in the findings of the Commission of Inquiry, was this: "*All these facts taken together were destructive of any theory other than the conspiracy to murder by Savarkar and his group*"). In the same letter, reflecting on the problem of identifying RSS members, Patel wrote "*in the case of a secret organisation like the RSS which has no records of membership, no registers etc., securing of authentic information whether a person is an active member or not is a very difficult task*.." (p 57)

The fluctuating positions of the Sangh on the Mahatma appear to be tactical. The impression left by utterances of RSS leaders is always (to me at any rate), that of persons who cannot distinguish cunning and cleverness from truthfulness and wisdom. They never seem to understand that 'Akhand Hindustan' and 'Hindu Rashtra' are incompatible ideals, that the achievement of the one automatically rules out the attainment of the other. Gandhi knew this instinctively. Speaking about those who combined communal hatred with slogans of 'Akhand Hindustan', he remarked: '*There is nothing in common between me and those who want me to oppose Pakistan except that we are both opposed to the division of the country. There is a fundamental difference between their opposition and mine. How can love and enmity go together?*'

Of course, we cannot prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the RSS ordered the murder. *Neither can anyone prove with certainty that it did not*. And that's the plain truth. We will never have forensic evidence of these crimes, we simply have to weigh the circumstantial evidence. The fact that Godse had left the RSS is not evidence (and Gopal Godse had other things to say on this); because organisational formalities mean nothing to ideologically committed cadre – aside from 'plausible deniability'. Could it not also be the case that their perverted sense of patriotism and as loyal sanghis they did their best to save the leaders? I repeat, the courts are not the proper place for these issues. The first step towards historical and political reconciliation is the acknowledgement of wrongdoing. That goes for all shades of the political spectrum. The word-play taking place today is nothing but a labyrinth of deceit.

I am reminded of an insight of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers: "*Truth – the word has an incomparable magic. It seems to promise what really matters to us. The violation of truth poisons everything gained by the violation.*" The longer Indians choose to play with the truth about the

murder of Mahatma Gandhi, the longer will communal hatred continue to poison the political system.

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MAY 1, 2017, CATCH NEWS

Annihilation – 50 years of Naxalbari

The nihilism of the Maoists is the mirror-image of the nihilism of a ruthless establishment. The first is suicidal, the second geared toward eternal conflict

The richest sense of irony I ever felt was evoked by a PTI report from Siliguri dated May 13, 1997, that a bust of Charu Mazumdar, a leading light of the Naxal movement, had been decapitated. It went on to report the *bandh* called by Naxalite leaders "to protest against the cowardly act." Shopkeepers were forced to down their shutters. The report then quoted the town mayor condemning the incident, "the miscreants who beheaded the bust could not have any political identity, they were simply hooligans" – the standard Indian cliche for condemnation of insults to great personages.

Twenty-seven years prior to this cowardly act, Calcutta (sorry, that was the name then) witnessed the Naxalite imitation of Mao's Cultural Revolution. This consisted in incendiary attacks on schools and colleges, violent disruption of examinations and the destruction of portraits and statues of famous figures from Bengal's history, including Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Rabindranath Tagore – not to mention Mahatma Gandhi. Overriding protests by comrades such as Sushital Ray Chaudhuri, Charu Mazumdar and his fiery ally, the journalist Saroj Datta, defended the iconoclasm of the revolutionary students, including their lack of knowledge of what they were doing*: "are the youth fully aware of the political implications?... Have they analysed the work of those whose statues they are destroying? No, they have not! But still, they are doing the right things"* He praised 'revolutionary' excesses and claimed, "the masses never

make mistakes."

The celebration of mindless violence is now manifest in several quarters, not least in the name of the Nation, the Cow and the Millat. Outbursts of violent rage are part of life, but it is another matter when they become intrinsic to some grand political design. Albert Camus famously distinguished between crimes of passion and crimes of logic – the latter being his name for violence in the name of History. It is time we recognised that the two have combined in the politics of the past century, wherein the passions of the many were (and continue to be) deliberately manipulated by the few in the service of their projects. Some ideologues have learned to infect politics with the masculine yearning for military glory and revenge against real or imaginary enemies. Such are the utopian visions of communalists of all hues. Others claim to possess knowledge of the truth of history – or its laws – which to them certifies the inevitable victory of their cause.

All such movements base themselves on the claim to superior knowledge; and an advance self-exoneration for crimes they have committed or plan to commit. They are ideological movements, which by definition possess (or are possessed by) an absolute truth. But truth has a universal ambience and cannot be tied to any particular nation or state or religion. Nor need we believe that the Creator of the Universe is particularly fond of this or that sliver of ground on an insignificant planet.

Ideology is the contemporary manifestation of religion. In its early days, the French Revolution attempted to enforce an atheistic worship of the Nation. The deification of the Nation soon assumed equivalence with the nationalisation of God. Within the communist tradition (notwithstanding Marx's powerful sociological analysis of capitalism), there emerged the Leninist doctrine of the infallibility of the Party. In this case absolute truth was guaranteed by the laws of History, known to leaders like Lenin, Stalin and Mao. Given the multiplicity of claimants to knowledge of God's will or History's laws, ideological scenarios are theatres of permanent conflict, both within and between the various camp-followers. Ideological movements are incipiently totalitarian, and the state-systems they seek to establish are imitations of theocracy, regimes of truth. Such movements are accompanied by extreme violence, directed both against the people they seek to represent, as well as their deemed enemies.

The never-ending character of ideologically inspired conflict in our

time should alert us to its nihilist aspect. 'Nihilism' and 'annihilation' have the same root: *nihil* or pure nothingness. (*Annihilation* was Charu Mazumdar's favourite word). The perpetual suspension of the present for the sake of an ever-retreating glorious future is an expression of nihilism. So is the equivalence of speech with silence, the celebration of death in the name of martyrdom and the disregard for life, the treatment of humans as bio-mass.

Ideologues are uncomfortable with ordinariness and seek to disrupt it. Undoubtedly, the brutality and injustice of our social order inspires some of us to destroy it root and branch. But the organisation of a killing machine as a means to obtain the final solution to injustice is a step into an abyss. In my knowledge the only study that characterised Naxalism as a variant of nihilism was Rabindra Ray's *The Naxalites and their ideology*. Aside from reminding us that Naxalism is intellectually driven; and that its stress upon correct social knowledge as the precursor to a correct strategy is common to the entire communist tradition, he raises – crucially – the possibility that it is not the 'correct analysis' that leads to the appropriate strategy, but rather, the already-desired strategy that seeks its own analysis, its own 'right line.'

Naxalism is the colloquial name for Indian Maoism. Its organisational form was inaugurated in 1969 as the CPI (ML). Extreme factionalism accompanied the birth of this party, with dissenting groups being dubbed counter-revolutionaries. Charu's faction insisted that India's constitution was a mask for a semi-colonial system and had to be overthrown by a peasant rebellion similar to the one led by the Chinese Communist Party. The Telangana uprising of 1946-51 was a point of inspiration. The CPI (ML) insisted on a boycott of democratic politics in favour of immediate organisation of an agrarian armed struggle.

Naxalism was never a movement of peasants and tribals seeking to overthrow state power. Rather this theoretical assertion was made by those who claim to represent the popular interest. The right to make this claim was derived from what the earliest Naxalites referred to as 'revolutionary authority'. The mantle of authority was obtained from the Chinese Communist Party led by Chairman Mao. Their early attraction to China as centre of world revolution soon led to a blind support for Chinese national interests. This was accompanied by an evocation of the violent stream within Indian nationalism, harking back to organisations such

as Anushilan and Jugantar. Well might our commentators refer to them as anti-national – Naxalites see themselves as inheritors of anti-colonial terrorism, and as genuine patriots.

Leaving aside the theoreticians, what attracts ordinary people to Maoism? The reason is not far to seek but is papered over by the apologists of the system that has sustained Naxalism. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that violence erupts not on account of a lack of 'development' or from economic causes, but from humiliation and injustice. Those who need evidence could research the forced land-acquisitions, arrests of peaceful activists, forced resettlements of villagers, molestation of women and incarceration of poor people for years on end, that are scattered all over the areas affected by corporate development. They could also consider the allegation (November 2014) by a retired Director General of the Central Reserve Police that certain state governments have a vested interest in insurgency.

Naxalism has nothing to do with tribal matters per se. Rather, it is the misfortune of India's Adivasis that the lands they inhabit are rich in minerals. The history of industrialisation in these regions is a story which can reveal much about the origins of Maoist extremism, but will our fire-breathing TV pundits and gung-ho patriots bother to examine the facts? When people despair of obtaining fair treatment at the hands of state and society, they become attracted to vengeful ideologies.

The nihilism of the Maoists is the mirror-image of the nihilism of a ruthless establishment. The first is suicidal, the second geared toward eternal conflict. Both sides could end the bloodshed easily if they wanted to – all it requires is the courage to critically examine one's own conduct and admit that ordinary people need peace. Above all, it requires that they remove their ideological spectacles and get back to ordinary life -– something that will include struggles for justice but not murder. There is no glorious red future waiting for us, nor a corporate utopia with malls accessible to everyone. But may we dare aspire to pass our days without fear?

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MAY 6, 2017, OUTLOOK MAGAZINE

Yesterday once more – 50th anniversary of Naxalbari

Speaking for myself – and this could be true for many others – I joined the Naxalite movement out of an inflamed sense of deep and prevalent injustice, in India and the world over. And I left it for the same reason. Between these two markers lies a story which when recalled by those whom it touched, would unfold like a Homeric legend or the Mahabharata of Vyasa. When I think about it, I can understand why epics grow with time.

This May marks the fiftieth anniversary of Naxalbari. And 2018 will mark fifty years of the world-wide uprising of 1968. There were four moments of radical utopia in the twentieth century that gripped the hearts of millions. The first coincided with the end of World War-1 and the Bolshevik revolution; the second was the German delusion of 1933 that became history's black hole; the third was a dream of universal peace which accompanied the birth of the United Nations. The fourth is known by the iconic number: 1968, the year of the Prague Spring, the Tet offensive by the National Liberation Front in Vietnam; the May uprising in France, the Cultural Revolution in China and the Black Power salute by US athletes at the Mexico Olympics. That was just the tip of it. Students the world over were affected by a radicalism that came from struggles in Latin America, Vietnam, South Africa and Palestine. This coincided with explosive discontent in India, where anti-Congress state governments were elected

in 1967, and Indian communism reverberated with demands for a more 'revolutionary' approach.

The impact these events had on us was emotional – I recall being deeply moved by Bertrand Russell's book *War Crimes in Vietnam*. Emotions were central to the magnetism of Naxalism. My experience of college-sponsored social service in Palamau during the Bihar famine in February 1967 was a turning point. I was 17 years old, and among my team-mates were my seniors Arvind Narayan Das and Vikram Chandra, both deceased. The District Magistrate of Palamau, the late Kumar Suresh Singh deputed us to report on relief operations. Arvind, Vikram and I went to a village named Narsinghpur Pathra, where we stayed at the village dispensary.

I had passed senior school at the Sainik School Kunjpura in the Haryana countryside; but this was my first glimpse of village life in Bihar (Palamau is part of Jharkhand now). Drought, scorching heat and scarcity had reduced the villagers to eating leaves and raw mango seeds; reliant on government support to avoid starvation. A food kitchen dispensed *khichdi* every morning to children, who would stand in line with little hands outstretched. Some peasants were trying to dig new wells to get at sub-soil water – but to no avail. The dispensary compounder was in no position to help people with ailments when the medicine they most needed was food and water.

The sight of my fellow Indians in the midst of famine was heart-rending. It also shook my faith in God. I remember arguing with some well-meaning Catholic nuns near Daltonganj, asking them how the Almighty could permit little children to starve, when they had done no wrong. It was not enough to be told that the ways of God were inscrutable. It took some years for me to learn that God did not hold a monopoly on inscrutability.

I acquired life-long friends during our sojourn. Arvind was a Marxist, and over days and nights explained to me why poverty was a function of class society, why no change of government would end exploitation; and why a total overthrow of class power was needed. It took little time for me to channel my sense of shock into a belief in a revolutionary ideology.

Soon after our return from Palamau, the Naxalbari incident took place.

Later in the year newspapers, especially *The Statesman* began reporting intense debates within the communist movement about the need for a new path. The ultra-Left were still members of the CPI (M), which was part of West Bengal's United Front government. The party had been formed

in 1964, in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. In 1967, there was an upsurge of working-class militancy in industrial plants. After Naxalbari, many communist mass organisations were affected by the Maoist line. In July 1967, the Chinese Communist Party's central organ, the *People's Daily*, hailed the establishment of a "red area of rural revolutionary armed struggle" in India. This was the period of the domination of Mao's ultra-left faction over Chinese politics. The Naxalites received crucial impetus from this international endorsement. The rift within communism was complete. It was to have fateful consequences.

In August 1968, Arvind became the first (and last) Naxalite President of St Stephen's College Students Union. Intense debates took place within and outside the college, on the university campus. I edited a cyclostyled journal named *Enquirer*, full of revolutionary rhetoric, some of which led to police inquiries. We wrote hyperbolic slogans on the walls of the university supporting Vietnam, Palestine, the IRA, Chairman Mao and the Indian revolution. We interacted with communist workers in old Delhi – one of my close comrades in the underground was a worker in the Birla Cotton Mills, whose ramshackle home in a working-class *bustee* was used as a shelter for Charu Mazumdar on a rare trip to north India in the winter of 1971.

In 1970, our group, including comrades from Hindu College, Miranda House and Jubilee Hall, staged a hilarious political lampoon called *India '69*, ridiculing the entire political spectrum, which was a big hit. An Intelligence Branch policeman asked me for the author's name – and refused to believe that we had authored it collectively. The economist Joan Robinson visited the Delhi School of Economics after a trip to China and wore a Mao cap as she spoke about the Cultural Revolution. I learned more about it from her book on the subject, published in a Penguin paperback. Penguin published many left-radical titles those days, including by Marx, Sartre, Fanon and Regis Debray. Needless to say, the *Communist Manifesto* was available for a few *annas* in People's Publishing House in Connaught Place. Chinese literature also flowed in from Calcutta, including texts by Mao and the little *Red Book*.

Charu Mazumdar's group had announced the formation of the CPI (ML) in April 1969. Violent actions against landlords – some extremely brutal – began to take place in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. There were also disruptive 'actions' in schools and colleges. Statues and portraits of personages such as Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Tagore

and Gandhi were vandalised. The walls came alive with revolutionary slogans and stencilled images of Chairman Mao. The term 'class enemy' expanded to refer to anyone *deemed* to be inimical to the revolution, and hence could include suspected informers, police officials and political critics. The vice chancellor of Jadavpur University was murdered in December 1970.

This period marked the apogee of Charu's authority within the movement. In May 1970, my friends Arvind and Rabindra went underground. I followed them in October. The reasons why some of us became active revolutionaries are complex. Suffice to say that we experienced a powerful moral imperative, something like a rediscovery of the freedom movement. Of course, it was hard to cause our families so much pain and anxiety. My father, a retired Army officer and prominent educationist, faced criticism for his failure to 'control' his own son. It is easy to denounce Naxalites as 'anti-national' and 'Chinese-funded'. But Naxalites saw themselves as freedom-fighters, flag-bearers of Bhagat Singh's brand of militant nationalism. Undoubtedly the Chinese Communist Party was already using Indian Maoism for its geo-political objectives – it was not similarly enthusiastic for revolution in Pakistan or Sri Lanka. But it could do so because of the powerful attraction Naxalism held for sections of the working population and students.

The period that we were 'underground' saw momentous happenings in the sub-continent. The clash with moderate communists became vicious. CPI (M) and CPI (ML) cadre engaged in murderous actions against one another. Naxalites began to threaten election processes with violence. In 1971 the pathways of global politics became hard to explain, and too much to bear. The revered Chairman Mao shook hands with Kissinger as Vietnam continued to be bombed. An insurrection in Sri Lanka was smashed by the Bandaranaike government with the support of India, Pakistan, the US, China and the USSR. Pakistan refused to honour the results of its general election and in March 1971 launched a military crackdown in East Pakistan, with the backing of the Chinese government. In the following months up to ten million refugees fled to West Bengal – at one point a lakh were crossing the border every day.

As a cadre on the move, I saw these poor people, bereft of hope, driven from their homes, camping in the streets of Calcutta or on the highways. Isolated (most of the time) from my comrades, I struggled to make sense

of what was happening to the grand design of Indian revolution. China blamed India and the USSR for the crisis in Pakistan; and initially I persisted in my loyalty to the Chinese version. But I was soon overwhelmed by the cynicism of the Chinese Communist Party. I was especially angry that the Chinese media had not informed the Chinese public or their global followers about the ongoing genocide in East Pakistan. Zhou En Lai's letter to Yahya Khan in April 1971, after he had begun the slaughter of innocents, was an eye-opener. Those who imagine that the degeneration of Chinese communism happened only after the death of Chairman Mao, should read this deceitful document (the text may be read in the first article in this volume). The People's Republic of China had revealed itself as a dictatorship, but certainly not a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

Unable to cope with events, the CPI (ML) was thrown into ideological disarray. In December 1971, I was in Calcutta, the epicenter of a global military confrontation. India, the USSR and Bangladeshi fighters were ranged against Pakistan, China and the USA. Before and during the war, the police conducted anti-Naxal combing operations. Naxalites were knifing traffic constables in the streets, and plainclothes 'police guerilla squads' were entering homes to shoot suspects. Professional musclemen in the bustees were employed by both sides, and there were massacres of Naxal cadre such as the one in Baranagar in August 1971. The spiral of death had assumed a life of its own.

Those two years for me were like a truth-shower, an introduction to the life lived by India's labouring people. There was little contact with my friends, for we were far apart in our chosen areas of work. Nor was revolution much in evidence – whatever the rhetoric, most of India was untouched by Naxalite politics. I worked in fields, factories and transport vehicles, slept on train platforms and streets, lived in slums and villages, made friends with the most unlikely persons. On one occasion I was lucky to escape the clutches of the Punjab police; on another I received lathi-blows on my shins from a couple of Delhi constables who thought I looked suspicious (I did). It was like swimming in an ocean of uncertainty; kept afloat by friendship and the love of my comrades, but most of all, by faith in the inevitable victory of world revolution.

In December 1971, as a tidal wave of war, arrests, torture and mass migration rolled over the sub-continent, the self-generative character of violence and the deceitful nature of ideological speech dawned on me.

Ideology had become the methodology for the destruction of conscience. Our 'party line' was reduced to sophistry and irrelevance amidst the suffering of Bengal's millions and the manipulations of the great powers. If Naxalism has survived for decades, it should serve to remind the Indian establishment – across the political spectrum – that the humiliation experienced by marginalized people can and will destabilise the system for an indefinite period. Violence is engendered by injustice, not poverty. It would benefit all concerned if our justice system were perceived as fair by the poorest in the land.

Let our journalists, writers, judges and officials use their consciences and think about the rioting, lynching and communal propaganda rife these days – are our rulers in any position to preach respect for law to Naxalites? Why should one kind of lawlessness enjoy impunity, and another be deemed anti-national? Will those who bombed the Samjhauta Express in 2007 ever be punished? Does the RSS respect the law? Or does it want to overturn the Constitution by subterfuge?

Since 1789, revolution has been the central fixation of politics, inspiring dread in some quarters and heady anticipation in others. But ideological thinking destroys individuality -- it matters little which camp you belong to. The mobilisation of private armies and vigilante groups, so common in our sub-continent, requires a systematic departure from thought to obedience, from speech to sloganeering, from mindfulness of ends to mindless hatred and violence. If the attainment of a just society is so dependent upon the transformation of commitment into bestiality, radicals of all varieties will succeed only in becoming mirror images of their chosen enemies. It all comes round in the end. 'Revolution' means the completion of a circle.

One of the favourite slogans of the 1968 generation was borrowed from Paris: *'Remember your humanity and rebel!'* It cuts both ways.

This is the second piece I wrote on the fiftieth anniversary of Naxalbari. You could also read *In Naxalbari, forty-eight years later* and an open letter which I wrote in December 1971protesting against the stand taken by China and the CPI (ML) on the Bangladesh crisis. Both have been included in this collection.

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JUNE 5, 2017, INDIAN EXPRESS

Naxalites should lay down their arms and challenge the ruling class to abide by the Constitution

India does not need a violent revolution to overthrow the constitution, but a mass satyagraha to defend it

> "We are not what we know but what we are willing to learn"
> – Mary Catherine Bateson

Age catches up with everyone, and it's been no different for ageing hippies and the Beatles generation. For some of us however, the half-century since Naxalbari has been the marker of a lifetime. Retired Naxals are unlikely to reach the centenary, so it was inevitable that we would be asked to write op-ed pieces for the media. As it happened, the Maoists killed 25 CRPF personnel in late April – a bloody anniversary in a violent history. Whatever happened to official conflict resolution? And to the red flag that Charu Mazumdar had prophesied would fly over Red Fort by 1975?

I've heard the phrase *peace process* from childhood – with reference to the Sino-Indian conflict, Vietnam, the Cold War, Biafra, Egypt-Israel, Palestine, India-Pakistan, Iran-Iraq, Yugoslavia etc. All were – or still are – embroiled in a 'peace process'. Not to mention the never-ending Hindu-Muslim peace process. Then there was Naxalbari. Thereby hangs a story which I have related elsewhere, so will not recount here. But to begin on a tangent – radical wisdom was that everything is political. We used to say everything has a class character. I gradually learned otherwise. Truth does not have a class character; nor do love, laughter, grief and conscience. If they are rendered political they cease being what they are; and we would

already be in an Orwellian universe. Air and water and grass are neither Hindu nor Muslim, neither proletarian nor bourgeois. But yes, extremist ideologies are fast becoming the opiate of choice for desperate people. If 'the centre cannot hold', it is because truth is fragile and of no use to anyone except in distorted bits and pieces. We refuse to stand on our own two feet. What sense may we make of this situation?

Bright future etc.

The Russian existentialist Nicolai Berdayev (exiled in 1922) said of communism that "*what is most terrible in it is the mixture of truth and falsehood*." We might rephrase this as the interplay of sociology and utopia. But this is a feature of ideology as such, not just its communist version. Ideologies combine carefully selected verifiable elements with dreams and promises. Their sociological features pertain to real socio-economic problems and conflicts. The utopian feature assures us of a dream-like solution to those problems; a promise made by a vanguard which will lead us to the glorious new dawn.

There is a further dimension, the impulse towards geopolitical reality. Historically this was expressed in projects such as the Crusades, Dar-ul-Islam, Lebensraum etc. or even the American Century, now drawing to a close. The New Medina, Khalistan and Hindu Rashtra fall in the same category, as does Isis, the latest manifestation of Islamic utopia. A century ago, the Bolshevik regime declared itself an armed camp of the world proletariat. The People's Republic of China in its earlier phase saw itself as the red base for world revolution. In each of these cases we see a fragment of world spirit aspiring to unity, a part of humanity declaring itself the whole. These are dreams wherein the dreamer believes himself to be awake in contrast to ordinary mortals who are asleep. And in each the impulse to violent assertion is paramount, because only via murderous passion can such movements gain momentum.

Eternal drum-beat

Militarism is the secret of eternal warfare, to which capitalism has accommodated itself. There's money to be made in conflict, ask any arms dealer, or foreign ministry. This is the ground shared by enemies, upon

which every victory is a defeat for humanity. But what if there is inertia to violent conflict, fuelled by psychological, ideological and economic factors? As in the impulse to revenge, doctrinal cussedness, combined with material benefit to some major decision-makers? What if the peace process is a chimera?

Militarism has a long tradition in India, evidenced most clearly in the activities of revolutionary terrorist groups such as Anusilan and Jugantar. Communal ideologies too, were obsessed with civil war. In November 1947 an AICC resolution warned that, "*the activities of the Muslim National Guards, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Akali Volunteers and such other organizations... represent an endeavour to bring into being private armies, (and) must be regarded as a menace to the hard-won freedom of the country.*" The proliferation of private armies after 1947 has proven the foresight of this warning. These formations include the Sunlight Sena, Khalistani groups, the Ranvir Sena, the Bajrang Dal, ULFA and jehadi groups in Kashmir and elsewhere.

All paramilitaries enjoy some degree of protection by legal parties. In the early 1980s, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi saw fit to encourage extremist activists in Punjab (Bhindranwale) as did her successor in Sri Lanka (the LTTE). The carnage that followed her assassination in November 1984 opened the floodgates of state-sponsored hooliganism and the blatant subversion of justice. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP and Congress jointly supported the vigilante Salwa Judum to terrorise those who dared resist the takeover of mineral-rich lands by corporates. Despite a Supreme Court order in 2011 disbanding it, this state-supported vigilante force continues under a different name. Such is the respect for law shown by our political leaders.

The paramilitary RSS has forged a far more sophisticated method of overthrowing the Indian Constitution than the Maoists. This method is based on V D Savarkar's directive of 1942, asking Hindutva cadre to infiltrate the organs of state. But it relies more upon ideological conviction than organisational affiliation. During the Babri Masjid demolition campaign, a retired Director General of Police joined the VHP and called for India's Muslims to be stripped of voting rights. This campaign cost the lives of some 1500 citizens in 1990 and 3000 in 1992. In the year 2000, a retired CBI director extolled the Bajrang Dal's activities at its annual function. The Modi regime has afforded impunity to vigilantism in the

garb of 'love jihad', 'Bharat Mata' and cow protection. Criminal cases related to terror attacks have been soft-pedaled where they involve RSS cadre. Interference with criminal justice has been attested to by the prosecutor Rohini Salian; and includes the Malegaon and Samjhauta cases. The Hindutva lobby has used official clout to unleash captive mobs, hate-speech, push RSS cadre into state institutions and suborn the security forces. The latter practice was noted by the Union Home Ministry in its February 1948 order banning the RSS after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination.

Elephant in the drawing room

It is time for the establishment to shift its gaze briefly from the stock market and ask itself what it objects to in Naxalite activity. Is it lawlessness and contempt for the Constitution? But does Naxalism hold a monopoly on lawlessness? Every mainstream party carries a burden in this regard. Not just the Congress and BJP/RSS, powerful state parties too are culpable. The CPI (M) dispatched a vigilante force to Nandigram on two occasions in 2007. Killer gangs of the CPI (M) and the RSS operate in Kerala. Isn't there a problem when people in authority misuse formal power to promote violence? The appearance on April 10, 2016 of Gujarat ex-DIG Vanzara, accused of engineering a fake encounter, on a podium with RSS leader Mohan Bhagwat signals something sinister – *the relentless effort by the RSS to abolish the distinction between legal and illegal violence*.

Those who want Maoist violence to stop must tell us what happens to their conscience in the face of the RSS' contempt for the rule of law. The Sangh defends itself by flaunting its patriotism. But Naxalites are nationalists – they see themselves as political inheritors of Bhagat Singh. When the Home Minister denounces the Sukma incident as cold-blooded murder, he needs to be reminded that his political allies have been murdering people on some pretext or the other on a regular basis. Was not the murder of Pehlu Khan cold-blooded? Did not the NHRC indict the Chhattisgarh police in January for sexual violence against Adivasis? Did not RSS affiliates attack a police station in Uttar Pradesh on April 23 and beat up policemen, even entering the residence of an IPS officer on one occasion? Does anyone believe that 'the law will take its own course' in these matters? We are on the verge of becoming an entirely lawless state,

and who, pray, is responsible for this?

Undoubtedly there are police officers, magistrates and judges committed to constitutional norms. But it is clear that the Modi government and the RSS are interested in securing an ideological bias within the criminal justice system. Why are murder trials involving Hindutva activists collapsing? Why was Judge Jyotsna Yagnik (who convicted Maya Kodnani and Babu Bajrangi in the 2002 Gujarat riots) threatened and her protection withdrawn? Why was Rohini Salian asked to go slow on the Malegaon blast case prosecutions? Why is the ruling party sponsoring an assault on judicial independence? Do we want the government of India to fall under the dictatorship of an ideology?

The Sangh Parivar and its supporters should understand this simple truth: the ideological corruption of justice will destroy India's reputation as a law-governed democracy. Whatever the stockbrokers, contractors and corporate managers might think of this, the erosion of this reputation will drive India's labouring classes and ordinary citizens toward desperation; and generate future insurgencies. Violence is an outcome of humiliation, not of poverty. Those dreaming of Hindu Rashtra should study the ongoing disaster in the Nizam-i-Mustafa next door in Pakistan. Akhand Bharat and Hindu Rashtra are mutually exclusive ideals – if you get one, forget the other. If you love India, call off your hooligans and practice the non-violence that you preach to Naxalites.

Naxalism

Naxalite insurgency in India is propelled by three factors – the brutal injustice experienced by the rural poor; the vested interest of a powerful section of the establishment; and the utopian ideology of Maoist intelligentsia, compounded by the criminalisation and logistical inertia of their military machine. The three work in tandem. Each is well documented – we need only recapitulate the 1986 Arwal massacre, the activities of the Ranvir Sena and Salwa Judum; the thousands of tribals in prison, the numerous allegations of unpunished molestation. The scale of the humiliation undergone by the working population has to be acknowledged in order to understand insurgency. The Naxalite project will never succeed, but neither will insurgency disappear. Indian justice is a manufactory for insurgents. A major factor is that many powerful persons

want it to continue. Thus, as recently as December 2014, a retiring DG of the CRPF stated that the continuation of Naxalite violence was beneficial for some state governments covetous of central funds. This has been corroborated by observers within the state apparatus.

However, people want the chance to get on with their lives –they want justice, but not at the cost of perpetual conflict. The comrades may well dream of going down in a heroic flame, but they have no right to impose that dream upon others. Insurgent violence leads only to trauma and the desire for revenge. Dreams of liberation get smothered in cruelty; warfare mutates into a self-propelling automaton. The numbers of ordinary persons killed by Maoists is legion, but we may simply recall the names of tribal policemen, Francis Induwar and Lucas Tete, tribal rights activist comrade Kenduka Arjun, NREGA activist Niyamat Ansari and journalist Nemichand Jain, all murdered between 2009 and 2013. Those interested can pursue the details of these unfortunates. And the deliberate derailment of the Jnaneswari Express in May 2010 that resulted in over 140 deaths was a crime that no ideology could possibly justify. Was it collateral damage? When communist actions become amenable to the Pentagon's terminology, we can see militarism for what it is – a doctrine for sociopaths and a pathway to criminalisation.

Regardless of the ethics of the Maoist leadership, normal persons can understand why it is the height of irresponsibility to perform actions whose repercussions you know in advance: lifelong sorrow for families of the dead; repression upon the civilian population; a handle for the government to attack journalists and lawyers; onslaughts on democratic organisations struggling for popular causes; and steady erosion of constitutional governance. Some commanders like Sabyasachi Panda (arrested in 2014), had realised the futile nature of Naxalite warfare. The point now is whether the cadre can use their experiences to distinguish between a struggle for social democracy and a suicidal waste of lives.

Lost opportunities

Decades of 'people's war' and the history of Indian communism have much to teach us. What is the record as regards human rights, resistance to communal politics and the preservation of democracy? Is it not clear that a section of the Indian ruling class wants to destroy democracy?

Are the comrades sure that there is no difference between constitutional democracy and a state under siege by the RSS? India does not need a violent revolution to overthrow the constitution, but a mass satyagraha to defend it. And that requires a much greater mental and physical effort than organizing a vigilante force.

Communists could have made such an effort in other contexts. Consider what might have happened in 1971 if the communists had made amends for the disastrous Adhikari resolution of 1942 (that supported the Muslim League), by initiating a reassessment of the anti-democratic partition of 1947. The CPI (ML) could have launched a debate free of the hateful views of communalists, both Muslim and Hindu. But the leadership was incapable of upsetting Chairman Mao. Dreamers of a classless society found it too utopian to question the partition of India. Thus, Naxalites became the only Indian party to support Yahya Khan, a bloody tyrant hated by his own people. Ultra-left communists turned out to be moral and mental zombies.

In 1990, if left-wing groups had set aside their differences in order to defend the Babri Masjid, they could have prevented the terrible atrocities unleashed by the communalists. Till this day Indian communism has produced no thoroughgoing analysis of communalism, the most grievous political issue for over a century. And, barring honourable examples (especially from Punjab during the period of Khalistani terrorism), the Naxalite movement has been reluctant to confront communalists.

Can Naxalites start afresh?

Democracy is a necessity for the workers movement – it is the ruling class for whom democratic institutions are a nuisance. The proper functioning of these institutions requires that people be able to exercise their basic rights without fear. Relief from violence would be a major gain for oppressed sections of society. Forcing the Indian rulers to implement the constitution is a major task that will require mass movements on an unprecedented scale, and statesmanship of a high order. Those who claim to work for the exploited classes must know that society desperately needs relief from violence. If Maoists had the courage to cast aside their futile dogma, they could regain a decisive position in national politics.

The inheritors of Naxalism should lay down their arms and challenge

the ruling class to adhere to the Constitution. They should call for a reform of the criminal justice system, root out corruption, punish the instigators of communal and caste massacres, disband militias including the armed wings of the RSS, repeal the SEZ Act, pass the Women's Reservation Bill and develop the forest and tribal areas for the benefit of the people rather than corporate interests. *Such a challenge, accompanied by an unconditional promise to stop the violence, will electrify the political situation*. It will place them in a responsible political position; and save the lives of thousands of ordinary people. Too much blood has been shed. Violence is predictable, comrades. Fifty years after Naxalbari, do something unpredictable. It will bring smiles to millions of faces.

Speak the truth

Stop the killing

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THE WIRE, JANUARY 19, 2019

Remembering Rabindra

Rabindra Ray, who taught sociology at the Delhi School of Economics till his retirement a few years ago, died on January 15, 2019. For 52 years I called him Lalloo (with two l's). His death has led to an outpouring of memories from his friends and students. This is one such –it's not an obituary. I would never be able to encompass his rich life in words.

I first saw Lalloo being led by his goatee from his room into the veranda of Allnutt North block at St Stephen's College by a senior. We were neighbours, two rooms separated us. He was not exactly a fresher, having spent a year in a pre-med course in Hindu College before migrating to SSC to study English. As part of the Xavier's Patna contingent, he had a stream of Bihari visitors shouting out Lalloo! I soon became an honorary Bihari. His circle was wide-ranging. He was a stellar actor for the Shakespeare Society; a bridge player, and a junkie, hence an attraction for the 'hippie' crowd. And I know of at least three of his teachers who said he was the most brilliant student they had ever taught.

One of his close chums was Arvind Das, the first and last Naxalite president of SSC Students Union. When, after a trip to Palamau in the midst of the famine of 1967, I too became a 'commie' (Arvind being the prime mover), Lalloo was contemptuous. Commies tell lies, he would say. The next two years all of us fought over communism and revolution, but it would always end in the Science Faculty Coffee House, where we would

gossip, drink coffee, eat coffee jelly, and keep an eye out for young ladies.

In 1970, our gang enacted a lampoon called 'India 69', a multi-lingual spoof on Indian politics. Lalloo played many roles, one of them Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin claiming the right to marry Indira Gandhi. Kosygin had two hangers on: CPI and CPM. I was the latter, Shahid Amin the former. In another, he was a sinister thug, asking a cowering man if he was a Muslim. In the background was the election symbol of the Jana Sangh with the caption Mein Lampf. A third featured an Indo-Australian Test at Eden Gardens, in which he was 'Lalloo the bowler'. Our performance brought the house down. Soon afterwards, the CID visited our campus, asking for the author. No one was, but Lalloo had contributed vastly, not least by his acting and sardonic style.

Lalloo stood second in the university in his BA. He got abysmal marks in some papers, and distinctions in most. In his MA Previous, the English department students began agitating over a newly introduced semester system. The university's attitude angered him so much that one day he decided to become a revolutionary. That was Lalloo all over – once he was convinced that the 'system' was incorrigible, he could change his mind in a second. It became difficult to hold him back. He and Arvind were the first to go underground.

But it was a shared sense of the absurd that bound us. We became the second set of office bearers of the SSC Wodehouse Society – Lalloo was president and I the secretary. Often he would walk into my room cackling about some Wodehousian gag. I can still hear him repeating 'Lemuel Gengulphus, Bart' and sniggering away for hours. We edited a cyclostyled rag called Spice with cartoons on its cover, and doggerel and fantastical tales inside. No one found it amusing except us, and a few faithful followers. Arvind used to say that the only good Spice was Old Spice. On our part, we roared with laughter writing them, and continued to do so for years whenever we recalled what we'd written.

A sense of the ridiculous was what enabled us to survive the Naxal underground. Even his departure for a revolutionary contact address in North Bihar was tinged with hilarity – he was dropped off at the Old Delhi Railway station by comrade Ajay Singh, but late that night Ajay's window was hit with some gravel. It was Lalloo, who had fallen off the train. Maybe it was an omen for the fate of the revolution.

The only time we met during 'UG' days was in Purnea, in December

1971, in the midst of the Bangladesh war. Few would have recognised him at the Purnea bus stand–Lalloo was just another North Bihari peasant: white vest, indigo lungi and drooping moustache. We drank toddy, walked through the lanes and slept on a wooden *takht*. We decided he ought to get out: there was no police warrant out on him, and he had a nasty lung infection. And we were disgusted with the CPI (ML)'s dogmatic adherence to the Chinese line over the Pak army action in East Bengal. It took me some months to opt out as well. Lalloo went home to Kanpur. I visited him there once; it was the first time I met his dear mother.

In 1972, I went to the UK for six months. When I returned, I stayed with Lalloo and Achintya (Monju) Barua in a garage in Tagore Gardens in North Delhi. I was canvassing permission to complete my MA; and god knows what he was up to. Monju was trying to pass his Hindi subsidiary. The garage was like a shelter for vagrants and unspeakably dirty. I was considered the Stalinist, always chasing comrades to behave. I once flushed their stash of grass down the toilet, which caused much consternation. I would wash his clothes, but he refused to wear clean clothes. 'Dirt is mans natural element', he would say. When we finally left the garage we went to a hole-in-the-wall photo studio in Kamala Nagar. The seat was tiny, so we sat with one of us in the middle and the other two straddling the bench sideways, looking over the middle one's shoulder into the camera. We looked like a bunch of unemployed pickpockets.

In the late 70's Lalloo underwent a psychotic break. He was ailing for some time. Some comrades visited him and noticed there was a problem. In the winter of 1977, he came to Madhu Sarin's and my place in Defence Colony – we climbed up the stairs one night to find him standing by himself in the dark. It was a jolt to see him like that. He wanted to stay 'a couple of days' – and ended up staying over four months, nearly driving us crazy as well. We were scared to leave him by himself, but also begged him to stay awhile with other friends, but he refused. Finally his family took him away for treatment.

We last met in Siliguri district in November 2015. It took me two years to convince him to accompany me and Monju to Naxalbari. We had never been there, even though the place meant so much to us. (Lalloo had published his thesis under the title *The Naxalites and their ideology*, in 1988. As far as I know, it was the first characterisation of Naxalism as an essentially nihilist doctrine). We wanted a photo of us in Naxalbari. I

travelled to Bagdogra with my friend PritaTrehan. Monju had picked up Lalloo from Darjeeling, and we all met at the airport. We got into the cab and said *chalo Naxalbari*. The driver thought we were nuts. But we finally located Kanu Sanyal's house in Sephtulajote village – Lalloo knew that it had been converted into a memorial. We spent two hours chatting with a comrade who was bemused to see us. I posted a small account of our visit on my blog. It was the happiest I had seen Lalloo in a long time. Being at home and looking after his mother had done him a world of good.

Lalloo could laugh at himself and that was what made his company so enjoyable. Years ago, he gave me a book of philosophical essays. One was called *The Futility of Theory*. Since his ruminations would go on for two or more pages without a full-stop, the next time I met him, I said yaar, you made your point by the middle of page two. Theory is futile. He began his usual cackle. In one of our last conversations, he told me his new philosophy book in Hindi had been published. I asked him if there were riots outside the book stores; and we both laughed for several minutes.

It doesn't sound right to say 'rest in peace Lalloo.' Always provocative and mischievous, Lalloo was never at peace, nor did he let anyone else be so. I loved him as a brother. Goodbye Lalloo, you always inspired all around you and made the world shiver. Till we meet again my friend. Adieu

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OCTOBER 2, 2024, TALK AT THE GANDHI PEACE FOUNDATION, NEW DELHI

The Oceanic Circle

Talk on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 155th birthday

> *The bane of our life is our exclusive provincialism, whereas my province must be co-extensive with the Indian boundary so that ultimately it extends to the boundary of the earth. Else it perishes*
> – Mahatma Gandhi, September 1947

> *The truth never dies but is made to live as a beggar*
> – Yiddish proverb

Introduction:

Three things occupied Mahatma Gandhi all his life: God, truth, and Ahimsa. He did not see them in different compartments but as threads in the fabric of human life. A life spent in pursuit of truth is a philosophical life. His efforts towards social and political reform do not subtract from his deeply thoughtful character. Gandhi drew his strength from the most noble qualities of ordinary people. He spoke to them in the language of their cherished symbols, legends and poets – and it was they, not any political leaders who perceived him as their Mahatma. This, combined with his deep sense of human dignity, constituted his *sthithprajna*, or calmness of soul.

Gandhi was a wise man. I would like to try and understand his

wisdom. My effort relies a great deal on the scholarship of other people. The mistakes are mine alone.

Gandhi possessed a powerful impulse toward confronting injustice and social evils. He also saw the struggle between good and evil as unfolding in every soul – not as a combat between nations and communities. If ours is 'the age of the intellectual cultivation of political hatreds', Gandhi stood in direct opposition to this mode of thinking. If politics is defined as 'the friend-enemy relation', Gandhi defined it as founded on friendship and dialogue. If politics are perceived as deceitful by definition, Gandhi insisted on truthful conduct in politics no less than in other spheres of life. An entire tradition of Western political thought, including Machiavelli, Hobbes, French Jacobinism, Carl Schmitt and Lenin, believed the state to be grounded on originary violence; but Gandhi believed such ideologies and such states were doomed to extinction.

Gandhi's ideas combined moral, theological and political elements. He did not view life as a material exile of the soul; rather as an opportunity to serve people. It could be said of him that he found his soul in those who suffered the misfortunes of history. This is why he could say of his first meeting with the peasants of Champaran in 1917, a meeting which came after strenuous effort; that the simple rural folk received him as if they were his age-long friends: *it is no exaggeration, but the literal truth, to say that in this meeting with the peasants I was face to face with God, Ahimsa, and Truth*. (*The Story of My Experiments with Truth*; Part 5, Chapter 14).

There are four issues that concern me here: the problem of anti-colonial strategy in a culturally heterogeneous society; a commitment to truth which is not contaminated by religious or national boundaries; the opaque nature of evil and its incompatibility with the idea of a benevolent God; and the human capacity to turn conscience against itself.

The Sovereignty of Good (the phrase is borrowed from Iris Murdoch)

In September 1947, soon after his famous Calcutta fast for communal harmony, Gandhi made the following observation: *Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living in and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives it is withdrawn*.

This a profound speculation on moral philosophy. We may combine it with his observation in Hind Swaraj: *The force of love is the same as the*

force of the truth or soul. We have evidence of its working at every step. The universe would disappear without the existence of that force. He had no great respect for history, which was the story of rupture; rather he wanted to restore to lived time the legitimacy of real friendship, without which society would have ended long ago.

In Platonic philosophy, the closest icon of the Good is the sun. We cannot look at it directly, but the sun makes sight possible; along with the powers of intelligent discrimination. We cannot contemplate the heterogeneity of the world without the light of the sun. A silent vision of the good comes *before* contemplation. However, in the first book of the Bible, it is God who says 'let there be light' and sees that it is good. And the same is repeated for all the things of creation. The vision of goodness is God's, and it comes *after* He has created the world.

Thus, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, goodness is recorded in an act of writing; and is relative to the will of God, who creates the cosmos. In the Platonic tradition, the cosmos is eternal, and it is good. Vision and hearing are sufficient for us to witness goodness.

Gandhi's intuition about self-generative goodness was spoken with deep conviction; as was his observation that evil is a parasite which feeds upon the Good. I do not know how he arrived at this conviction; but others have had similar thoughts. Even in the prophetic tradition, evil is seen as privation, (*abhaav*) a lack or loss of good, rather than something with a life of its own. A similar comment was made by Hannah Arendt in 1963, when she wrote that evil is without depth; it is only extreme. Only the good has depth; but human evil can '*lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface*.' ((*The Jewish Writings*, 471). But it is true that in the early Abrahamic tradition, some Christian sects believed evil to hold an autonomous status, engaged in a perpetual struggle with God.

Must there be an obstacle between these differing views of good and evil? No, since the prophetic traditions also tell us that the world is good. All metaphysical traditions religious or not, revere the light: the prophets are those who catch glimpses of the light of goodness. Again, pride (*ahankara*), tyranny and the will to power are seen as the root of evil across the centuries. Problems arise with the demand for unquestioning obedience to dogma. This is why in a discussion with journalists in 1936, Gandhi said: *I cannot surrender my reason whilst I subscribe to Divine*

revelation. And above all, 'the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life.' But you must not misunderstand my position. I believe in Faith also, in things where Reason has no place e.g., the existence of God (CWMG, vol 64 p 71)

The Biblical citation about '*the spirit giveth life*' is revealing, for it speaks to the possibility of overcoming evil. There was a difference between evil and the evil-doer; hence there was always a potential for us to correct ourselves. For Gandhi, the holy spirit was the same as the inner voice, the conscience, which all of us possessed. This was why he placed such importance on reaching the mind through the heart.

Without this appeal to both conscience and reason, we risk ethical fragmentation. When blind faith in a 'national' God becomes the defining belief of a so-called chosen people, it pushes us towards spiritual apartheid. When theology is reduced to orthodoxy, and the believers are kept as armies for political gain; we are on the brink of violence in God's name. What does all this have to do with our theme? Three things:

one, is uniformity of belief desirable or possible in a political system?

two, is nation-worship compatible with religion; or is it a form of atheism?

three, can political leaders truthfully claim to speak on God's behalf?

Civil religion and the theological-political problem

This is the theological/political problem: should we be ruled by divine guidance or by unaided human reason? The problem is easily stated: if we are to be ruled by divine wisdom, we must accept that no guidance comes directly from God. As Gandhi observed, holy scriptures come to us via a process of double distillation; first through the prophets, and then through their disciples. Hence, we must rely upon our reason to discriminate between various interpretations of the divine message.

If we rely upon human reason alone, we are obliged to conduct a dialogue about the Good. How may we do this? Montesquieu side-stepped the problem by saying the issue of religion versus atheism was less important than the utility of religion, which was necessary to control popular passions. The same idea was developed by Rousseau in his *The Social Contract*, which contains a chapter on civil religion, where he says legislators should place their recommendations in the mouth of God, because people are then more likely to believe them. This is a step towards

the co-option of religion by politics.

I recently came across the writing of the contemporary philosopher William Desmond, who uses the concept of 'the between' as a way to understand the relation of religion to philosophy, the empirical to the transcendent, intuition to analysis, and of dialogue to solitary reflection. Plato described humans as neither gods nor beasts, but somewhere between the two; and the same can be said of philosophy. I think this is the best way to understand Gandhi: he accepted the variety of belief systems; and was negotiating a path to swaraj whereby the potential for conflict could be reduced. The link between religion and politics was a reference to an ethics of public activism. Religion was a source of morality and wisdom; politics was the sphere of social and political responsibility. On the term *Rama-Rajya* too, he was crystal clear:

> *I must repeat for the thousandth time that Ramanama is one of the many names for God. The same prayer meetings have recitations from the Koran and the Zend Avesta. Devout Muslims... have never objected to the chant of Ramanama. Ramanama is not an idle chant. It is conceived as a mode of addressing the all-pervasive God known to me, as to millions of Hindus, by the familiar name of Ramanama. 'Nama' at the end of Rama is the most significant part. It means the 'nama' without the Rama of history.... As to the use of the phrase 'Rama-Rajya', why should it offend after my having defined its meaning many times? It is a convenient and expressive phrase, the meaning of which no alternative can so fully express to millions. When I... address predominantly Muslim audiences, I would express my meaning to them by calling it Khudai Raj, while to a Christian audience I would describe it as the Kingdom of God on earth. Any other mode would, for me, be self-suppression and hypocrisy.*
> (CWMG v 85, p 135)

For Gandhi the enforcement of a uniform civil religion was both hypocritical and impossible. The transformation of popular belief in the successor states of the British Empire has shown the dangers of this utilitarian approach to religion. Today religion has been overtaken by ideology; and for some of us, is a means of waging political warfare. The greatest enemies of religion are to be found amongst its own followers.

Once, in the face of hostile sloganeering (*Gandhi-vaad murdabad*) in Bengal in February 1940, Gandhi remarked, "*I love to hear the words 'Down*

with Gandhism'. An 'ism' deserves to be destroyed. It is a useless thing. the real thing is non-violence. It is immortal. It is enough for me if it remains alive. I am eager to see Gandhism wiped out at an earlier date... I have never dreamt of establishing any sect. If any sect is established in my name after my death my soul would cry out in anguish" Gandhi never suggested a doctrine of an imaginary future that required evil deeds to be done in the present. The present and future were fused together, only virtuous deeds in the present would contribute to the world's betterment. This concept of time focusses on presence; rather than transience.

Gandhi's theological creativity, and the problem of evil

The questions: how should we live? What is good and what is sinful? are common to all communities, even if the answers are different. Theories of evil are as rich as those of the origin of the world. The effort to explain evil while retaining faith in God's goodness is called *theodicy*. Some scholars describe all religions as failed theodicies. Hegel claimed his philosophy to be a theodicy: 'a justification of the ways of God' in human history. But the history of the past century and the genocidal events unfolding to this day make it difficult to accept Hegel's theodicy. Max Weber considered the *karma* doctrine the most consistent theodicy, which made our ill-fortune dependent upon past lives, all of which transpired in 'beginningless time'. Retributive justice was placed in creation.

In my view, the problem is not soluble. We humans yearn to understand life and the world. But evil is inscrutable, it overpowers explanations; no theodicy can satisfy our thirst for an explanation for human cruelty and useless suffering. God's power is equally inscrutable: infinite space and eternal time remain beyond our grasp. God is the name of the everlasting mystery of our origins and our natures. No telescopes can solve it.

Leszek Kołakowski (1927-2009) wrote about this theme thus: t*o reject the sacred is to reject our own limits. It is also to reject the idea of evil, for the sacred reveals itself through sin, imperfection, and evil; and evil, in turn, can be identified only through the sacred*. To say that evil is a result of pure chance is to say that there is no evil; and therefore, that we have no need of a moral capacity which is already there; imposed on us whether we will it or not. If we believe that society can be improved, it follows that there must

always be people who think of the price paid for every step of progress. He concludes: *The order of the sacred is also a sensitivity to evil*. It is less a matter of belief in God, and more a matter of self-imposed limits to speech and action. (*Modernity on endless trial*; Chapter 6)

If there is no virtue, there is no law, because everything is permitted. And if everything is permitted, then it does not matter what we do or say. There is no difference between speech and silence. Slavery is freedom, ignorance is knowledge, sophistry is wisdom.

We need a sanctuary of goodness and courage. In Gandhi's case, I would say that his personal sanctuary was his *sthithprajna*; and for social behaviour, *swaraj*. Attaining it requires control of the will and emotions. This approach is based on the assumption that while God, truth, and goodness are the same; falsehood is a rupture in truth, and evil is a rupture in goodness. This is why good is self-existent, evil is not. Just as Brahman does not exist in time, but time is within it; so also, the light contains the darkness. It is for us to use our sight and insight to perceive it.

That which we call sacred is the discovery and acceptance of our limits; and this is precisely the sense of good and evil which Gandhi wrestled with all his life.

Gandhi tried to resolve the dilemma by focussing on social reform on a daily basis (*rachnatmak karyakram*, or constructive work) and confronting the injustice of colonialism and violence. He knew that violence has a momentum which can overpower our self-control. He attempted to develop the alternative momentum of self-discipline and the fellowship of satyagrahis. He was firm in his determination to prevent violence from poisoning India's liberation. And he undertook this task in the most violent decades in world history.

Truth, justice and ahimsa

Truth may mean different things to scientists, theologians and linguists, but none can dispose of it, even those who dismiss it as an illusion. In Indic knowledge, *dharma* combines truth, duty and virtue. Thus, for Gandhi, truth had an ethical function, combined with practical wisdom. Colour prejudice, unjust laws and colonial domination were errors in social practice: the simplest example of this reasoning is his refusal to accept the label 'coloured person' to be thrust upon him in a railway carriage reserved

for whites. The denial of our common humanity was an untruth; as was the assertion that some of us are superior to others. The struggle against untouchability was a struggle for human unity, a *satyagraha*, an adherence to truth.

The centrality of *ahimsa*, and of courage in the face of violence, was not merely a political tactic. It contains the seed of a distinct moral philosophy. And it is the basis of the dialogue of the in-between zone; the foundation stone of a civil society which can overcome the difference between the natural goodness of the cosmos and the goodness of divine command. We have more control over our immediate practices than over our goals. Impure means, the worst of which was to do violence to others, would poison our goals. Gandhi seemed to assume a homogeneity in religious communities (as in his support for the Khilafat movement); but he was steadfast in his belief in the autonomy of individual conscience.

His evidence to the Hunter Commission of Inquiry into the Jallianwala Bagh massacre shows the importance of non-violence as a means of ensuring that differing opinions did not lead to the disintegration of popular resistance. The evidence also shows his strong disapproval of executive power unchecked by the judiciary, and I would advise our lawyers and judges to read it carefully. (CWMG, v 16, p 408; January 1920).

Ahimsa was not a doctrine, but a reminder of our limits. The source of these limits may be called God or Creation, but it remains mysterious. What matters is that they are binding on all of us, not just some chosen few: this is the lesson of the hooligans of Calcutta in September 1947, who came to the fasting Mahatma and threw their weapons at his feet. No further proof is needed of the battle between good and evil taking place within every soul.

The problem of violence as original legitimation

In Machiavelli's Discourses, we find the following recommendation: *If one wishes that a sect or republic live long, one must bring it back frequently to its beginning*. In his view, all states were founded on terror. The recovery of ancient virtue required the re-imposition of the fear that had made men good at the beginning. This was true not because of their innocence but because they were gripped by fear. The lesson is clear and brutal: at the beginning there is not Love but Terror. Machiavelli's new teaching is based

on this alleged insight; which anticipates Hobbes' doctrine of the state of nature.

Is violence at root an unspoken legitimating factor in the evolution of states? Most nation-states have evolved through a process of civil war; extreme violence often formed the backdrop to the establishment of constitutions. The prevalence of political assassination in the successor states of the British empire points to the stamina of ideologies of inclusion and exclusion. A research project on the history of mass violence has an entry on the Partition of India. The analysis contains the following assessment:

> *'Violence was not just a marginal phenomenon... It was on the contrary at the very heart of the event. Nor was it merely a consequence of Partition but rather the principal mechanism for creating the conditions for Partition. Violence constituted the moral instrument through which the tension between the pre-Partition local character of identity and its postcolonial territorial and national redefinition was negotiated. Violence operated as the link between the community and its new national territory. That is precisely what gave it its organized and genocidal dimension as it was meant for control of social space so as to cleanse these territories from the presence of other religious communities.'* (Lionel Baixas)

The history of our sub-continent shows us that the originary violence has become stabilised: we are forever at war. This is true globally as well. The legitimacy of the state is formally certified by the constitution, but informally it is sought not in the name of the law, but the violence of the origin. This is why our governments want us to remember the horrors of the origin. And that is why the horror is sought to be repeated, in art, as in the streets. We may now understand the truth of Gandhi's observation in Hind Swaraj: *what is granted under fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts*. (*Hind Swaraj*, Chapter 15.)

Sthithprajna

Gandhi approached his conflict-ridden world as a *karmayogi* and a seeker after truth. He approached both the mind of the coloniser and the colonised by 'seeing from within.' This approach underlay his idea of 'heart

unity' – something larger than and beyond political or religious doctrines. But to obtain a glimpse of the heart of the other person, means that we have the capacity to understand the emotions of others – a capacity that Gandhi insisted was intrinsically human.

Reason has its legitimate place for Gandhi, but a reason that knows its limits. That is why he insisted on the capacity of human beings to interpret scripture. If this is accepted, our responsibility is vast; given the existence of those who insist they can function as the executors of God's will. Such claims cannot be verified, and therefore we are obliged to question them.

We have no answer to the mysteries of eternal time and infinite space, so we give the mystery a name, as in God or Big Bang. This solves nothing. In his reply to the query Is God a Person or a Principle, his response was clear: the divine was inexpressible in language. However, as he wrote in response:

> *In my view, whether called Rama, Rahman, Ormuzd, God or Krishna, He is that Supreme Power that man is ever trying to find a name for. Man, though imperfect, strives after perfection and in so doing is caught up in the tides of thought... it is immaterial if some worship God as a Person and some others as a Great Power. Both are right, each in his own way. Nobody knows what is intrinsically right and nobody is likely ever to know. The ideal, to be an ideal, must forever remain out of reach. All the other forces are static, while God is the Life Force, immanent and at the same time transcendent.'*
> (CWMG v 85, p 136. Emphasis mine)

Let us note the use of the word '*immanent*' (antarnihit). In the same letter he referred to it thus: '*man, in praying, worships the Great Power residing within. Only he who knows this may pray. He who does not, need not pray.*' The divine impulse was *within* each soul, not external to it. Gandhi believed all humans to possess the impulse to goodness; it was the only means for Indians to evolve a decent civil society. The question of good, evil, truth and falsehood remain central to human life. All religious traditions have grappled with these questions, and sages across cultures have provided us with their answers. If we can understand them despite the distances of time and space, this indicates that an ethical community built upon mutual respect is possible. It requires an effort to realise this. As he remarked in his prayer meeting in November 1947:

> *But when someone commits a crime anywhere, I feel I am the culprit. You too should feel the same. If I were to commit any crime you should also think that you too were guilty of it. Let us all merge in each other like drops of ocean. If the drops of ocean remain apart, they would dry up. But when they mingle together in the ocean, they can carry huge ships across their expanse. As with the ocean so with us. After all we also are an ocean of human beings.* (CWMG v. 90, p133)

With this, we exit the domain of dogma and enter the space of the soul, which lies between philosophy and theology; theory and life; ordinary and extraordinary things. Even in the dogmatic traditions, the crack in the door through which the unbeliever is invited to become a convert demonstrates the reality of the in-between. Why? Because the believer could not make the invitation unless he believed in the possibility of conversion. What happens between the moment of invitation and the moment of thought? Why should we wish to convert anyone to an ideology or a faith? What is gained by establishing homogeneity or uniformity of belief? Why not improve ourselves before criticising others? What exactly do we want, domination or friendship?

What Gandhi called 'heart unity' was not a theory but the reality of friendly dialogue. If that reality were given stability, it would create the oceanic circle which in his words, would extend to the boundary of the earth. Without it, the world would perish.

This was Gandhi's *sthithprajna*, his serenity

Gandhi's community

In 1931, Havildar Chander Singh Garhwali refused to open fire on the Khudai Khidmatgar protestors in Peshawar, telling his English officers that it was not the duty of the Indian Army to shoot Indians. For which act of defiance he spent eleven years in jail

In 1937, the German businessman John Rabe, saved thousands of Chinese peoples' lives during the Nanking Massacre by the Japanese Army

In 1940, a Portuguese diplomat in occupied France named Aristides de Sousa Mendes defied his orders to give thousands of visas to Jews fleeing from the Nazis. He was dismissed from service and denied his pension by the Salazar government

In 1943 21-year-old student Sophie Scholl and her brother and friends of the White Rose group were executed by the Gestapo for denouncing Nazi war crimes

In 1942, Maharaja Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji of Nawanagar, adopted a thousand Polish orphans, and looked after them for the duration of the war. They called him their father.

In 1947, Comrade Gehal Singh, member of the CPI gave his life for helping thousands of Punjabi Muslims cross the border to Pakistan

Words of humanity, words of courage

What drives such people to stretch out a hand to strangers? To this question we have no answer. We can only repeat and remember their own words.

In 1937, the German priest Pastor Neimoller stood up in his church and declared: *No more are we prepared to remain silent at man's behest when God commands us to speak*. These words caused him to be sent to a concentration camp.

When the Polish social worker Irene Sendler was asked why, despite being tortured by the Gestapo, she rescued hundreds of Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, she said *she had no choice*.

The Serbian Protestant priest Tibor Varga looked after scores of Syrian refugees in 2015. When asked for a photograph in front of his church, he gestured to the refugee shelter and replied *this is my church*.

During the same time, Father Stratis Dimou, a Greek Orthodox priest founded a charity to help refugees and migrants; this was his duty he said, for *love has no religion*.

Legendary Pakistani social worker Abdul Sattar Edhi (1928-2016) spent his life caring for victims of violence. His last words were *mere mulk ke gharibon ka khayal rakhna*.

In 2019, the Sicilian fishermen Carlo and Gaspare Giarratano risked prison to save 50 Libyan refugees from a sinking boat. They said it was their duty, because *no human would turn away*.

In 1968, Daniel and Philip Berrigan (a decorated soldier in the Second World War) were the first Catholic priests to receive jail sentences in America for their opposition to the Vietnam war: they raided a recruitment centre and burnt documents. Their statement read: '*We confront the Catholic Church, other Christian bodies and the synagogues of America with*

their silence and cowardice in the face of our country's crimes. Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlour of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning Children.'

All these noble souls are living examples of the oceanic circle. Neither religion nor nationality have a place here. They are not remembered much, nor are their stories taught in history lessons. And there are thousands of them whom we do not know.

Gandhi considered history to be a story of rupture, a record of conflict. There was no point looking for love and soul-force in history, he said, for '*you cannot expect silver ore in a tin mine.*' He refused to accept either the 'laws of history' or the inevitability of violent conflict. Commenting on questions by a correspondent in America in 1926, he wrote: *If we are to make progress, we must not repeat history but make new history... If we may make new discoveries and inventions in the phenomenal world, must we declare our bankruptcy in the spiritual domain?* (CWMG; v 30, p 415)

Gandhi rebelled against the tidal wave of history. He confronted it head on. What do the above examples signify, if not the human capacity to extend love and friendship to strangers? Is not this capacity an essential means to overcome endless conflict?

The Oceanic circle

The expanding circle has been an age-old symbol in human culture. The circle marks the true infinity, which has neither beginning nor end. In its mode of outward expansion, it must begin with that which is nearest; and grow until it merges with humanity. This is not a dream of imperial domination, but of solidarity. This is how Gandhi conceived it:

> *In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. Therefore, the outermost*

circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it. I may be taunted with the retort that this is all Utopian and, therefore, not worth a single thought. If Euclid's point, though incapable of being drawn by human agency, has an imperishable value, my picture has its own for mankind to live. Let India live for this true picture, though never realizable in its completeness.
(CWMG v 85, p 33; July 28, 1946)

Gandhi's wisdom signifies an alternative way of addressing the world's problems: from ecological ones to the problem of permanent wars and conflict. He was a patriot, but not a nationalist in the narrow sense: that is the meaning we get from his wish: '*my province must be co-extensive with the Indian boundary so that ultimately it extends to the boundary of the earth. Else it perishes*.' The oceanic circle was not invented by him, it was already always there. Gandhi reminded us to look at it again.

In the twilight of British power in India, political groups threw away the available chances of mutual accommodation. Gandhi spoke of love and mutual respect in the midst of hatred and carnage. Some were pessimists even when there was hope. Gandhi gave people hope in the midst of despair; he appealed to their better instincts at the worst of times. He did not give humble Indians their dignity, he reminded them of it. He did not give us our capacity for friendship and communal harmony, he reminded us of it. This was the message of his last fast in January 1948. It is a message from a man of extraordinary goodness, strength and courage.

Nearly three thousand years ago the thinker Heraclitus spoke of the soul thus: *You could not search out the furthest limits of the soul, even if you traversed all of the ways, so unfathomable is its logos*. Gandhi's soul is indeed unfathomable. He resembles the moral pilgrim of Plato's cave, who ascends towards the light in search of knowledge, and returns to his fellow human beings to tell them what he has seen. Let us remember that for him, the most important journey was the journey within. His fast in Calcutta in 1947 demonstrates his capacity to move the consciences even of persons who had committed violent crimes. As also those of the English and Anglo-Indian policemen who wore black arm-bands in solidarity with the British Empires' most steadfast opponent. When the violence began to end, he insisted it was God's work. When pious ladies wished to perform a puja in thanks, he asked them to sell the *saamagri* and distribute the money to the

poor. What was his message, they asked: My life is my message, he replied.

Albert Einstein famously said of Gandhi, that generations to come would '*scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth*.' It is less well-known that a global poll conducted in 2000 by readers of the BBC News website voted Mahatma Gandhi the greatest man of the past thousand years.

In October 1947, All-India Radio arranged a special broadcast on his birthday, and requested him to listen. He declined, saying he preferred rentio (the flat spinning wheel) to radio. The hum of the spinning-wheel was sweeter. He heard in it, he said, the '*still sad music of humanity*'. The spinning wheel was a small wooden circle; but the worldwide outpouring of grief upon news of his assassination amplified the sound of the *rentio*.

Gandhi's oceanic circle had embraced the global population.

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Khuda Hafiz

Many years ago, in the mid 1990's, I had occasion to hire a cab in Amsterdam. It was after dinner at a friends' place. Once inside the cab it turned out the driver was an Indian immigrant. Or so it seemed. I asked him, and he said his birthplace was Surinam. Then he began speaking in Hindi, and the way he spoke was almost musical. We chatted while he drove, exchanged some information about what I was doing, where in India his ancestors hailed from (it was Bihar), and whether he had ever visited India (he hadn't). Our little journey ended, and I paid him the fare. As I got out of the cab, he looked at me and said: *achha laga aap se mil kar, khuda hafiz*. It was soft and mellifluous, like the rest of his sentences. That was the last time anyone spontaneously wished me with those words. I wished him back, and of course that was the last I saw of him.

In the winter of 1972, I spent some months in London, where I had been dispatched by my parents after my disillusionment with the Naxalite movement. My uncle was then the Indian ambassador to Austria, and I planned to visit him and my aunt in Vienna. I arrived in Paris on December 30, stayed a night with a friend, and caught the Orient Express, then still operating its famous journey from Paris to Istanbul. I had a simple unreserved ticket, and very little baggage. I had hoped to get a seat, but was obliged to board without one. I spent most of the journey in the corridor, sitting on the floor next to the little vent at the bottom of the

Amsterdam, 1996

compartment door nearest me, to warm my freezing limbs – December in central Europe is very cold!

It was only late next morning, some way past Munich, that I was able to sit down in a vacated seat. I was exhausted, for I had neither food nor drink, I had to preserve my meagre cash to catch a taxi to the Indian embassy in Vienna. On the seat opposite me there sat a man, possibly in his early 30's, who greeted me with a smile. It turned out he was a doctor, an Iranian, also going to Vienna. But as he spoke French, we could only manage a sparse conversation. I think his name was Mohsin, but I'm not sure. We reached Vienna in the afternoon and said our goodbyes. I made my way towards the station exit to show my ticket and passport, and stood in the queue, my knees sagging from cold and hunger. Suddenly Mohsin appeared by my side, with something wrapped in a paper napkin: it was a hot sandwich. He gave it to me wordlessly, smiled and melted into the crowd. I could barely say thank you. Never was a sandwich more welcome.

In 1979, I visited some close friends in Australia; and went along with them on a trip to Fiji, which was the home of my hostess, a Fijian Indian. We stayed in Suva, the capital. One day they decided to visit an old friend in a village in the interior of the main island of Viti Levu. The journey included a bus ride and a motor-boat navigating through water pathways in a mangrove delta, with thick foliage hanging over close mud banks. At the village we were greeted by their friend, a one-time civil servant from the Fijian bureaucracy named Orea. He was a big and cheerful man. We

roamed around the village, which consisted of wooden houses on stilts to protect them from water-logging; and exchanged greetings with his neighbors. By late afternoon, it was time to get back to Suva. But it felt so nice being there that I expressed the wish to remain for a while, and then everyone said why don't you stay the night and get back tomorrow.

Rewa River, Fiji, 1979

So that's what happened. My friends took the boat back, and I hung around with Orea. As evening drew near, we sat in a large room in his wooden hut. A few children in their early teens came and sat on the floor, and then a welcoming ritual unfolded. A large plastic bucket of drinking water was placed on the floor, and a packet of brown powder emptied into it. The powder was made of the dried root of a plant called kava, a staple with Fiji islanders. The mixture had to be stirred continually. A half-shell of a coconut was passed around, and the little gathering clapped hands with every refill. Everyone drank until the bucket was empty, and meanwhile the children began to sing folk songs with one of them playing a guitar. This carried on for an hour or more, when I found myself nodding off into a calm stupor – apparently the normal reaction to a round of kava, which is non-alcoholic, and also soporific. I lay down on a mattress and drifted into a deep sleep.

The next I knew it was early morning and I blinked my eyes at the sunlight streaming through the windows. Beautiful voices were singing

Orea in his village, Fiji, 1979

choral music in a nearby church, also housed in a hut on stilts. The harmony was angelic. The only other sounds were birdsong and the susurrus of breezes wafting through trees. I had slept so deeply I could scarcely believe it was morning. I breakfasted on delicious fresh fruit, chatted a bit more with my host, and left in time to catch the next bus. I never met Orea again, but can say without exaggeration that it was one of the most enchanting experiences of my life.

This one is not so pleasant. In 1982, I was involved in an agitation in my college of employment, Ramjas. It had to do with the victimization of the college gardener, Sita Ram, on whose behalf I had sat on a nine-day hunger strike. It's a long story, but on February 16, I was followed (I rode a scooter to work) and on a lonely part of the journey adjoining Qudsia Park, a car suddenly screeched to a halt in front of me and four men with iron rods got out. I tried to turn around, but skidded and fell. In seconds, they were upon me, hitting me on my legs and face. It lasted less than a minute, because a vehicle drove by, and the men ran away. My leg was fractured and my face smashed, with many teeth knocked out. I lay there bleeding, when a policeman on a scooter stopped, looked at me, and asked a pedestrian whether there had been an accident. He said no, this man has been assaulted. Both then disappeared.

I lay on the road for several minutes, when a Fiat stopped beside me. There was a middle-aged couple inside. The man got out and spoke to

me with concern, but I couldn't speak. Then he gently put me in the back seat and drove me to Bara Hindu Rao hospital, on top of the Ridge. Once there I heard the couple telling the doctors they had picked me up in that condition. I was removed to the emergency room and I never saw them again, nor discovered their identities. But their act of kindness was one which I can never forget nor ever repay.

Belfast, Shankill, 2000

My last vignette is an account of two encounters with the same person. I first met Mari Fitzduff in Helsinki in 1990, at the European Nuclear Disarmament conference, conducted in Helsinki and Tallinn, Estonia. One of the sessions was about religion and conflict, where I heard an Irish woman speak about the violence between Catholics and Protestants. I suddenly realized I couldn't make out to which denomination she belonged. She was passionate about non-violence and peace, not about 'her' faith. There was not a trace of partisanship in her speech. After the session I approached her, and we walked briefly in a park outside the venue. It was a meeting of minds.

Once the conference was over, I never imagined we might meet again. But in 2000 I visited the city of Derry, in Northern Ireland, for a seminar

Bobby Sands mural, Northern Ireland, 2000

on peace building. It was hosted by Mari Fitzduff. In the city itself an atmosphere of animosity was palpable, with sheets of steel dividing streets and localities from one another; and giant murals depicting violent defiance. Even pavements were painted in political colours.

Nonetheless, my brief sojourn was marked by an experience of great friendship and warmth from the Irish, and I said so to my hostess. We had no time for personal conversation, but after the conference was over Mari saw me off at the bus to Belfast. Just before boarding, I couldn't help saying something which had lingered in my mind the entire trip. I said to her – you Irish are such wonderful, generous and musical people. My appreciation was loaded with an unspoken question, and her intuitive response told me much about India. We love strangers, Dilip, she said, except our own. I could have hugged her then. Our own strangers. Three words loaded with history and tragedy. The Mahabharat, Karbala, Wagah, Palestine – it goes on. I never met Mari again, but I'll never forget her words.

In Belfast, 2000

Sometimes we meet people just once, or fleetingly. But they touch you with deep friendship. There is something profound in such meetings, for they are recollections. You find something which was already there. Strangeness disappears with the merest gesture, a helping hand stretched out in desperate straits, a night spent in a remote village on the other side of the globe, with a warm sandwich. And with three words.

Thank you, Mari, Orea, and Mohsin; and the couple who lifted me from the road on February 16, 1982. And hello again, my nameless cab driver from Surinam. *Khuda hafiz* my dear friends. May God protect you.

ABBREVIATIONS

AICC: All India Congress Committee
CPI: Communist Party of India
CPI (M): Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI (ML): Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CRPF: Central Reserve Police Force
DG: Director General
DGP: Director General of Police
IPS: Indian Police Service
NDA: National Democratic Alliance
NHRC: National Human Rights Commission
NREGA: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
PIL: Public Interest Litigation
RG: Rajiv Gandhi
RSS: RashtriyaSwayamsevakSangh
SC: Supreme Court
UPA: United Progressive Alliance
VHP: Vishwa Hindu Parishad